

Disclaimer: If you recognize it, I don't own it.

Summary: This starts off during the Goblet of Fire, with two changes in the initial conditions. First, Hermione doesn't believe Harry when he tells her that he did not put his name in the Goblet. And second, Harry has an odd sort of friendship with Daphne Greengrass which has slowly grown since a chance meeting in their first year. Flashbacks will explain that a little more throughout the story. Enjoy.

As the sun began to set over Hogwarts, its most famous student was sitting outside by the shore of the lake contemplating the events of the previous few days. 'Well, this year has gone downhill a little earlier than normal,' Harry Potter thought with a sad smile.

The previous night his name had come out of the Goblet of Fire, despite the fact that he had never put it in. Thinking about the Weasley twins' unsuccessful attempt to enter the contest he wondered how such a thing was even possible. As bad as that night had been, today was even worse. No one, not even his best friends Ron and Hermione, believed him when he insisted that he had not put his name in the Goblet of Fire. Neville seemed to be the closest to believing him, and that was only because he responded with a confused look and a shrug saying "I don't know, Harry". A huge screaming match had broken out at lunch when Harry tried to talk to Ron and convince him to see it from his point of view, and as a result he doubted that he would be on speaking terms with his alleged 'best mate' for quite some time. That had also cost his house 20 points, courtesy of Professor Snape. Hermione didn't scream at him, but let it be plainly known that she didn't believe him either and was upset with him for breaking the rules so blatantly. So Harry was out here, trying to avoid them and rest of his classmates. But the sound of footsteps approaching told him that not everyone was trying to avoid him.

"Hello Potter" said a some what emotionless voice that was still quite pretty. Harry looked up from his thoughts to see Daphne Greengrass. At first he was a little surprised by her sudden appearance, but after a moment's thought realized it was entirely typical of their previous interactions with each other. Harry didn't think they were friends exactly, but it seemed like once every few months they would find themselves in long intense conversations, typically about the

dangerous circumstances that Harry constantly found himself in. Other conversations were about her frustrations with the expectations placed on her as a member of one of the "elite pureblood families". It was odd in that there was usually very little small talk and at other times they barely even acknowledged each other. Harry reasoned that they were both amused about the secret "friendship" between a Gryffindor and a Slytherin. Not even Ron and Hermione were aware that Harry had ever talked to Daphne outside of class.

"Hello Greengrass."

As Daphne sat down on the shore a few feet from him, Harry took the opportunity to really look at her again. She had grown up quite a bit from the first time they spoke during the winter break of their first year. Harry knew the blond haired Slytherin had a reputation for not only being one of the most beautiful girls in the school but also as unapproachable. She had few friends and didn't seem interested in making any more, another one of the reasons that Harry was intrigued by their odd friendship. For a few minutes neither of them spoke, but simply turned and watched the lake. Finally, Daphne broke the silence.

"Well Potter, I'm waiting." she said, looking at Harry expectantly.

"Waiting for what?" Harry answered with a confused look on his face.

"For you to tell me that you didn't put your name in the Goblet of Fire." she answered simply.

"But I didn't! Why won't anyone believe me?" Harry said loudly.

"Calm down. I believe you, Potter. Putting your name in the goblet like that just isn't your style. Now if you believed that doing something so reckless and stupid might help out those ignorant friends of yours, then I believe you would do it without hesitation. But for fame? No, that just isn't you." Daphne explained. Harry let out a sigh, happy that someone had finally believed him. "So I take it you can't just refuse to compete can you?"

"No, apparently the fact that I didn't put my name in doesn't matter. It is still a magically binding contract, and the penalty for breaking it would apparently be severe." Daphne nodded at his response, having expected it. Anyone who broke a contract like that would likely end up dead, or if they were really lucky they would spend the rest of their life as a squib.

"Well then I guess you compete. Did they tell you anything about what the tasks are going to be?"

"Not a thing. I will probably just end up hoping to luck my way out of another bad situation. Seems to be my lot in life." Harry answered with a small laugh. Daphne caught the genuine laugh at the end of his statement, realizing that his depressed mood was starting to lift a little. "Do you know what pisses me off the most about this though? That my two 'best friends' don't believe me. What's wrong with them? I mean, you figured it out and I would think that by now they would know me better than you. No offense to you, of course."

"None taken. They will probably come around eventually. Well, Granger will at least. Weasley strikes me as a jealous idiot so I wouldn't hold my breath on that one."

"I don't think I am going to worry about it. I just have too much else to think about right now. Like how in the hell I am going to get through three tasks set up to test the skills of wizards three years older than me."

Daphne nodded her head in agreement with his decision. "A wise choice, Potter. I knew you had it in you. Any idea how you are going to prepare?"

"It would be a whole lot easier if I knew what I was preparing for. I guess I will just start going through the defense and charms books for this year and the next few, trying to learn all the spells I can so that the other might not have too much of an advantage." Harry said with a sigh.

"I'm a little bit surprised you hadn't done that already. Don't give me that 'what are you talking about' look, you know exactly what I mean."

You've somehow managed to get yourself into life threatening situations every single year that we've been here. I swear Potter, don't make me be the only one trying to keep you alive." Daphne answered with a smile and a small shake of her head.

Harry laughed and said "Yes but if you didn't that would mean there wasn't anyone in Gryffindor worth talking to, wouldn't it?"

"Too true." she said, softly laughing with him. And for a few minutes they just sat there silently, each enjoying the other's company while staring out over the Black Lake as the sun finally set. Eventually, Daphne turned back to him and said "It is getting dark, I'm going to head in. What about you?" she asked as she stood up and brushed the dirt off of her school robes.

"I think I will sit out here for a few more minutes."

"Suit yourself." Daphne responded as she turned to walk away.

"Hey, Greengrass." Harry said prompting Daphne to turn back towards him. "Thanks. I guess I needed someone to knock some sense into me." Daphne smiled at his thanks and answered, "Your welcome." Harry watched her take a few steps back towards the castle before she stopped and turned around again looking like there was something she wanted to say.

"You know, if you want some help preparing for the tournament I will be around." Daphne said with an uncertain look on her face.

"I'll remember that. Whatever it is I'll be doing, I would appreciate the help." Harry said with a grin on his face. Daphne didn't answer, just nodded in acceptance and continued walking back to the castle. Harry watched her go, feeling as if her offer of help had really been an offer of friendship. And he was glad to have at least one friend who wanted to be around him.

That night Harry's dreams were thankfully not about a large old house containing Wormtail and Voldemort, but were instead about the first time Harry had truly met Daphne. The dream started with an eleven year old Harry staring at the Mirror of Erised. He had sat there looking

at it for hours, trying to figure out what it all meant. Eventually Dumbledore had found him staring at the mirror and ended his obsession with it, but that night still lay in the future during this memory. Finally deciding it was time for him to get back to his room, young Harry picked himself up and walked out the door. He was so lost in his own thoughts he never stopped to put his invisibility cloak back on or to make sure no one was watching him.

"You've been looking at the mirror all night, haven't you?" a voice softly spoke from the shadows, startling Harry. His first instinct was to run, but he doubted the person meant him any actual harm and he was already caught anyway. So he walked towards where the voice had come from and found a girl he recognized as a first year Slytherin sitting on a bench watching him. He tried to recall her name, but could not.

"Hi, I'm Harry Potter." he finally answered.

"I know. I'm Daphne Greengrass, and you didn't answer my question." she reminded him.

"You already know I've been looking at the mirror. You've tried it too, haven't you? What did you see?" asked Harry excitedly.

"That's an extremely personal question to ask someone you just met." Seeing his confused face, Daphne asked "You do know what the mirror does, don't you? It shows you what you want the most, so basically you just asked me what do I want more than anything else in the world." Harry seemed to think about this for a few moments, and then nodded in agreement.

"I see my parents." Daphne sighed at Harry's willingness to give up extremely personal information. Very un-Slytherin. "But something has been bothering me. I can't remember what they look like and I've never seen a picture of them, so I wonder if that is what they actually look like or is it just my imagination." Harry sat down on the bench next to Daphne, obviously this question had been annoying him for quite some time.

"I don't know, but if I had to guess I would say that they probably looked like what you see in the mirror. Even if you can't really remember them, I am sure the knowledge is still somewhere in your head. The mirror has to be reading your mind somehow to know what you want, right?" she reasoned.

"I guess so. I always knew that what I was seeing wasn't real, but it just feels hard to look away, you know?" Harry said.

"Yes, I do. I'm not going to tell anyone that you've been looking at the mirror this whole time, but I am not going to look at it anymore and if you know what's good for you you won't either. It's like looking at the mirror is addicting, and the more you do it the more you want it." Harry knew she was right, but also knew that he would most likely be back the next night if for nothing more than a peak. But he promised himself that he would use it less, now worried that the mirror might be some type of evil artifact. Part of his mind argued that the mirror didn't feel evil and there was certainly nothing evil about the images it showed, but the worry remained. Trying to shake that thought, his attention turned towards the pretty girl sitting next to him. He knew next to nothing about her, other than the fact that she was in Slytherin and they had a few classes together.

"I'm surprised you're even bothering to talk to me about this, me being a Gryffindor and you a Slytherin. Aren't you guys supposed to hate our guts?" he asked a little bit sarcastically.

"I don't care too much for the house rivalry nonsense. Seems like a big waste of time. Sure, I'll cheer for Slytherin during Quidditch but that's as far as I am willing to go. But don't you change Potter, watching you and Weasley's little feud against Malfoy is very entertaining." Daphne laughed as she said. Harry shrugged his shoulders at that, wondering if the rest of the school felt that way about him and Draco. The blond little punk just brought out the worst in him.

"Glad you're enjoying the show, I guess." Harry answered. "Although, the best entertainment still comes from the Weasley twins."

"Don't remind me." Daphne groaned. "In November they somehow managed to turn my hair bright blue. Allegedly a third year girl in my house was the intended target and I just got in the way. They apologized, but ran off before I could demand they turn it back. It lasted two whole days!" Harry laughed, that sounded like something they would do. He wondered briefly if he would have made friends with Daphne if he had been sorted into Slytherin like the Sorting Hat wanted. He didn't remember her hanging out with Malfoy's group of friends, so that was definitely a point in her favor. Eventually he decided that it would indeed have been possible, one thing of many that would have been different if he had not become a Gryffindor.

A few minutes later Harry yawned and said "It's late, I'm going to bed now. It was nice talking to you."

"Good night, Potter." she told him as he got up and started walking back towards his room while she continued sitting on the bench. Watching as the dream ended, Harry noted that Daphne had never called him Harry. It was always Potter. And he had taken her lead and always called her Greengrass. 'Strange...' he thought as his sleep cycle shifted and his memories of first year slipped from his consciousness.

The next morning Harry was up early, hoping that he could make it to breakfast and finish before Ron made it there. The night before Ron had made sure that Harry overheard all of the insults and accusations he had made about Harry while talking to Seamus during a game of chess. Harry had eventually gotten so frustrated with Ron's behavior that he slammed his book shut and hastily walked out of the common room towards their dorms and was in bed with the curtains drawn by the time Ron finally made it back to the room an hour later. Harry also wasn't particularly happy with Hermione, who had witnessed the entire scene and yet had said nothing about it. She just sat there pretending to read with an odd expression on her face. He had expected her to say something, anything, but in the end she had just tried to act like there was nothing out of the ordinary going on.

Harry got to the Great Hall early enough to be one of the first people there. The only other Gryffindors there were a small group of seventh years frantically going over notes for an up coming test. Harry had

heard talk about how difficult the NEWT year was, and for a moment was thankful that he was not in their place. Then he chuckled, remembering just what his current situation was. Making his way to a seat towards the middle of the long table, Harry sat down and began his breakfast. About ten minutes later Harry noticed Neville coming into the Great Hall and smiled when he sat down at the table across from him.

"Good morning, Harry." Neville said casually as he began to eat. Harry dropped his fork and stared at him in confusion. Just yesterday Neville had been one of the people not sure what to think about Harry and his place in the Triwizard Tournament.

"Neville, do you still think I put my name in the Goblet of Fire?" Harry asked.

"You've always been nice to me, Harry. And I don't think you have ever lied to me, so if you say you didn't do it I believe you. I'm just sorry it took me so long to see it that way." Neville answered. Harry's smile got a lot bigger when he heard this, now thankful that he had a few friends who believed him.

"Thank you, Neville. That really means a lot to me." Harry responded sincerely. Neville just grinned at him as an answer and went back to eating his breakfast. When they started talking again the topics were of the normal sort that Harry had missed for the past two days: complaining about evil professors (like Snape, obviously), worrying about schoolwork, and Neville excitedly explaining a Herbology project he was working on for extra credit. Harry wasn't quite sure why Neville wanted extra credit in Herbology, he had the best grade in their entire year in that subject. Better even than Hermione's, whom seemed to have a perfect grasp of the theory but trouble working with the actual plants. Their conversation was interrupted by the sounds of an argument coming from the entrance to the Great Hall. Harry looked over to see Ron and Hermione practically yelling at each other, although it was hard to figure out what exactly they were fighting about. As they got closer it became clear that each one was blaming the other for making them late for breakfast. Harry laughed at the thought that in a small way it was his fault. He was usually the one to make sure Ron woke up on time and got Hermione to stop

studying for the days classes so that they would be able to eat without being rushed. Harry took their entrance as a sign that it was time for him to leave, which he did after a quick good bye to Neville.

Thankfully neither of them saw Harry as he made his way out of the Great Hall and down towards the dungeon where his first class of the day, Potions, would be held. 'At least there is one thing around here I can count on,' Harry thought with a sarcastic grin, 'Snape's undying hatred for me. Yay.'

The next few days passed rather uneventfully. Other than Malfoy's random insults, the only person to really talk to Harry was Neville. Harry supposed he should be more upset than he was, but he had been an outcast at Hogwart's before and found it hard to care about the opinions of such fickle people. Once that week, he had passed Daphne in the hallway and she had sent a small smile his way. In his spare time he had taken to spending hours in the library looking for new spells and ways to make up for his youth and inexperience during the tournament. He had occasionally seen Hermione studying in the library, but he made no attempt to approach her and repair their battered friendship. She made no effort either, other than sending sad looks his way. Harry had decided he had done nothing wrong, and therefore the responsibility for making the first move towards fixing things should be made by one of them. The rest of his free time was spent in an empty and seemingly long abandoned classroom he had found on the third floor, not far from where the three headed dog had been kept in his first year. Here he could practice the spells he had taken notes on in the library without worrying about other people watching him. After a few days of this Harry was already able to perform almost all of the spells from this year's books in Defense Against the Dark Arts, Charms, and Transfigurations. He was confident that by sometime in the next week he would be able to start fifth year spells.

After a long night of practice, Harry made his way back to the Gryffindor common room, exhausted from the several hours of practice he had put himself through. His private training was going much better than he had expected it to. Despite his only slightly above average grades Harry had noticed that he was almost always one of the first people in his classes to master a new spell. The

problem was that his excellence in the practical portion of the classes was negated by his subpar performance in the theoretical parts. Harry knew he wasn't stupid, he just didn't put forth the effort to do the written assignments that he should have. Part of him wanted to blame Ron (who was even lazier than he was) for that, but was aware that in the end it was his responsibility. Harry made a vow to himself to try harder from now on, because he knew that his life rested in his own hands and he needed to be prepared. He was so engrossed in these thoughts and his desire to crawl into bed and stay there for the next week or so that he didn't even hear his name being called until it was repeated, this time a little louder.

"Harry!" It was Ron, sitting on one of the large, comfortable chairs in front of the fireplace in the common room. "Can I talk to you for a minute?" Harry just stood there staring at him for a few seconds. 'Could Ron really be about to apologize for his behavior? Before even Hermione?' he thought. Harry nodded his head and walked over, sitting down in another chair near Ron's. Harry waited for his estranged friend to start while Ron looked nervous and uncomfortable, trying to figure out exactly what he was going to say.

"Listen mate, I know we got into a big fight about the Goblet of Fire but I was hoping we could put that behind us. You should see how unhappy Hermione's been. But I guess what I really meant to say was..."

'Here it comes,' Harry thought, 'Ron is actually going to apologize for one of his mistakes. Wow.'

"...I forgive you." Ron stated simply, as if that was what Harry should have been expecting to hear.

"You what?!" Harry yelled in shock.

"I forgive you." Ron answered, seemingly oblivious to Harry's rising anger. "I was mad that you found a way to put your name in the cup and didn't tell us. Then even more when you wouldn't just admit it to us, but I get it now. You're better off if you can convince people that you didn't break the rules." Harry stared at Ron, trying to convince

himself not to curse Ron for his stupidity. Through it all, Ron grinned in the belief that he had done the right thing.

"Ron, I'm not going to tell you again. I did not put my name in the Goblet of Fire. I do not want to be in this tournament, and if they would let me quit I would in a heartbeat. I have been honest with you about this entire thing, and I have no reason to apologize. You are the one that should be asking for forgiveness." Harry said, raising his voice just a little.

"You are such a bloody liar!" Ron spat back. "We all know what you did, there is no use in denying it! You should have at least told your best friend how you did it, maybe I could have tried to enter too. But no, you've got to have it all for yourself, don't you? And here I was, trying to be the better man about the whole thing and you just throw it back in my face. Screw you, Harry!" With that Ron stormed off from the common room and into the bedroom, slamming the door as he went. Harry watched him go, wondering if he had just witnessed the end of his friendship with Ron Weasley. Even if not, he realized, they could never go back to the friendship they had before. That bridge had been burnt to a crisp. Having no desire to follow Ron up to the room, Harry moved to a couch and laid down deciding to nap for a bit and wait for Ron to fall asleep before he went to bed. Soon his tiredness won out over his anger and Harry drifted off to sleep. When morning came hours later and the earliest risers started waking they found him still asleep on the couch. Most of them just thought it was odd, but some of those that knew him better wondered what was wrong with Harry Potter.

The following days proceeded much like those before them, with the exception of Ron being even more of an ass than he had ever been. Harry thought Hermione still looked sad whenever she would sneak a glance at him. All of Gryffindor had become tired of the non-stop fights going on between Hermione and Ron. It seemed that without Harry there to act as a buffer between their personalities they clashed constantly. Harry thought the situation was a little sad, but he was glad that it gave the Gryffindors something to talk about other than him. The rest of the school still considered him to be the best topic for conversation however, although the glares that so many of them shot

his way were easily ignored. Harry laughed at the fact that he had never seen the Hufflepuff's, Cedric Diggory's house, so angry.

Harry continued to train and within a week he had made it through almost half of the fifth year spells. Every night he pushed himself and his magic as hard as he could for as long as he could until he reached the point where he thought he would faint from exhaustion. With every passing day Harry felt himself getting stronger and able to put more power behind his spells. He had never read anything on the theory behind how a person's magical strength is determined, but he guessed that it must be something like physical strength. Only in this case instead of running or lifting weights to build muscle mass he was casting powerful spells to increase his available power. He enjoyed the feeling that his new found strength gave him, and on some level he finally understood why someone could become obsessed with gaining more.

His nervousness about the first task was seemingly always present. Harry had heard that people had died in the Triwizard Tournament before and he knew that he was already starting out with a disadvantage. Frequently he wished that he could just walk away from the tournament but he knew that was impossible. Another, smaller, part of him was actually quite excited about the tournament. Harry had always loved a challenge, especially when it was something he was not expected to do well in. That was part of the initial reason he adored Quidditch. He still enjoyed the sport, but was starting to realize that he liked the flying much more than the game itself. On days when he needed a break from his training he took his Firebolt to the unused Quidditch pitch and flew, letting the wind crash into him and for a moment forgetting all of his troubles. He supposed that if things were different he would have spent time with his friends, talking and laughing as his worries faded away. But without them, he needed something else.

Today was one of Harry's flying days. The first task was a mere ten days away at this point the stress from the anticipation was starting to get to him. One of his favorite stress relievers was to fly high up into the air before diving straight down, going as fast and as close to the ground as he could before pulling up. On this occasion he took the time to stop at the top of his ascent and take a good look at Hogwarts,

the place that he felt more at home at than anywhere else. The castle was easily visible, as were the Black Lake and the Forbidden Forest. However, Hagrid's home looked tiny from this high up. It was then that he noticed something new off in the distance. From this far off it appeared to be a quarry of some kind. 'Do they have mines at Hogwarts?' Harry wondered. Deciding to get a closer look, he sped off towards the structure.

The first thing he noticed as he got closer was the stands that were in the process of being built. They looked a lot like the ones surrounding the Quidditch pitch he had just left. The stands looked large enough to hold everyone in the school and then some.

"Of course! This is where the first task is going to be!" Harry said to himself. Then, realizing that as a Triwizard Champion he probably wasn't supposed to be here, he cast disillusionment charms on himself and his Firebolt so that he would hopefully not be noticed. The protection the charms provided was good enough for now, but he found himself wishing he had his invisibility cloak with him. Satisfied that he was as hidden as he could be, Harry flew closer to the arena as he now thought of it and tried to figure out what was going on. What he had thought was a mine or quarry was actually a huge stone pit. The bottom part was fairly level, except with the middle section raised a few feet. One side of the arena had a less severe slope, with a path leading up to a large tent. Harry took one last look at the pit and decided to inspect the tent, hoping that he would be able to find out more about the first task. His hopes were answered when he noticed a small group of people coming out of the tent and walking down to the arena. Harry recognized the person at the front of the group to be Ludo Bagman, head of the Department of Magical Games and Sports.

"Now, if you'll all follow me I will show you where our four champions will face their first challenge!" Bagman said as the group followed him down the path to the arena. Harry flew nearby, close enough so that he could hear every word being spoken. "Now, I'm not supposed to be telling anyone the details about the first task. But we're all friends here, no? I'm sure you can all keep a secret." Harry almost fell off his broom in shock at his good luck. The rest of the group also seemed interested, and gathered in closer to Bagman who looked quite

pleased to be the center of attention. "As we speak, four dragons are being brought to Hogwart's. One for each of our champions!"

"Ludo! You can't seriously expect children to slay a dragon!" one member of the group yelled. Harry had to agree with him, he knew that bringing down a dragon was difficult for a group of fully trained wizards, let alone one teenager who would have had no idea what he was facing.

"No, no, not to worry." Bagman assured them. "They will not have to kill the beast, just to recover a golden egg that the dragon will be guarding. A clue pertaining to the second task will be placed in the egg. Each contest will be judged on if they were able to retrieve the egg, how long it took, and how they did it." Excited murmurs broke out from the crowd. Meanwhile, Harry looked back out towards the arena. He now realized what he had mistaken for a quarry was actually a man made dragon's nest. He had never seen a real one before so he had no idea on whether or not it was accurate, but he assumed so. The group of people continued down to the nest, clearly excited about the tournament. Harry followed them, hoping to gather more helpful information about the tournament but Bagman did not seem willing to talk about the other tasks.

"Alright everyone, let's head back to the tent where dinner shall be served. You will all have the chance to see this again, I promise. I have arranged for the Department to provide each of you with front row seats!" Bagman proclaimed to the delight of the group. Harry doubted that he could sneak into the tent unnoticed, even with the disillusionment charms, and that he might as well head back to the castle. As he flew back, Harry thought about the challenge to come.

'Dragons! They expect me to fight off a dragon long enough to steal something from its nest. How in the hell am I going to do that' he thought. 'I'm going to have to call in help getting ready for this one I guess.' he finally decided. Smiling, he wondered if Daphne had any idea what she was getting herself into when she offered to help him.

Harry made his way into the Great Hall for dinner with a smile on his face. Although the idea of fighting a dragon was not very appealing, just knowing what to expect made him feel a lot better about his chances of surviving at least the first third of the tournament. Plus, he still had a little more than a week to figure out what he was going to do. He decided to spend the rest of his night in the library trying to find out how to attack a dragon, and hopefully by tomorrow he could have someone else thinking about the challenge as well.

Dinner was already half way over by the time Harry noticed an empty seat across from Neville and sat down. As he began to eat he noticed Ron, who was sitting at the other end of the table, get up and walk out of the Hall after glaring at Harry for a few moments. He didn't mind, and in fact was happy Ron had not decided to make a scene during dinner. Meanwhile, Neville had stopped eating and was looking at Harry with a curious look on his face.

"What's got you so happy, Harry?" Neville asked. Harry thought about what he should tell his friend, and Neville truly was a friend. Harry regretted the three years in which he had known Neville and not let him get as close as he allowed Ron and Hermione. Harry wondered how much he should tell him and how much he should keep to himself. While he didn't want anyone to find about his advantage, he knew a little extra help couldn't hurt. And maybe he had been underestimating Neville all of these years.

"Neville, you can keep a secret can't you?"

"Of course, Harry."

"OK. I know what the first task is going to be." Harry said prompting a shocked reaction from Neville. Harry leaned in a little closer and whispered "Dragons."

"Seriously? Wow, that is going to be tough."

"Yeah. You don't happen to know an easy way to bring one down, do you?"

Neville laughed and answered "No, I don't think there is an easy way. Gran took me to a dragon preserve once on vacation and we saw the dragon handlers trying to get one into a cage. It took ten wizards a half hour to do it." Harry frowned, clearly this was going to be even more difficult than he had anticipated.

"Well, I don't have to cage one or even kill it. I just have to take something from its nest."

"You don't really think that is going to be easier, do you? Dragons are very protective of their nests, Harry. You really don't want to fight one head on. Maybe you could try distracting it somehow, and then get to the nest while the dragon is gone." Harry nodded at the idea, it was one he had been considering.

"But how do you distract a dragon?" Harry wondered.

"I dunno, but they've got to be scared of something right?"

"I guess. I'm heading to the library after this, hopefully I can find some way to get their attention."

"Do you want some help?" Neville offered. "I'm caught up on my homework, and I would probably just end up playing exploding snap in the common room the rest of the night otherwise."

"Thanks Neville, that would be great."

"No problem. I..." Neville stopped what he was saying and looked up. "Harry, Hermione's headed this way." Harry turned around and sure enough, his bushy haired old friend was headed directly towards them. He tried to keep a neutral expression on his face while she sat down at the table next to him. Neville, having watched how the three 'friends' had acted around each other since Harry's name came out of the Goblet of Fire, eyed Hermione with suspicion.

"Hi, Harry." she said quietly.

"Hello Hermione. Is there something I can do for you?" Harry asked, causing Hermione to frown.

"I don't want to fight anymore, Harry. I want things to go back to the way they were."

"We're hardly fighting Hermione. In fact, this is the first time you've talked to me in almost two weeks. So what has changed? Did you finally realize that I have been telling the truth this whole time?" Harry retorted.

"I don't know. I want to believe you, but Harry I saw how excited you got when they announced the tournament and I know how competitive you can be."

"Sure I was excited, but so was the rest of the school!"

"Hermione," Neville spoke up for the first time, "I thought Harry was supposed to be your best friend. I trust him to be honest, why don't you?" Harry and Hermione were both a little shocked by this statement, as neither of them had ever heard Neville speaking so strongly in defense of anyone before. Harry smiled, Neville was a better friend than he had given him credit for.

"Neville, this is between Harry and I. Please let us..."

"No, Hermione." Harry said, cutting her off. "It's a good question."

"It's not that I don't trust you, I just thought that there was more going on here than you've told us. I guess you could be right. Just let me think about it, ok?" Hermione asked. Harry merely shrugged his shoulders.

"Hermione, I think I have already lost Ron's friendship. I hope I don't lose yours, but I haven't done anything wrong here."

"Surely things with Ron can't be that bad." Hermione said, not responding to the rest of Harry's statement. "You two can patch things up, right?"

"I don't think he wants to. I know you have seen how he has treated me the last two weeks. In fact, I had hoped you would say something about it."

"I thought that if I got involved I would make the situation worse. I didn't want to take a side if that meant the three of us wouldn't be friends anymore."

"Things can't just go back to the way they were, Hermione. Everything has changed. I don't want to lose you, but I can't force you to see it my way. Just think about it. I'll see you later." Harry pushed his chair back and with a nod to Neville left the Great Hall leaving Hermione and Neville alone. Hermione sat thinking, obviously on the verge of crying. Neville looked at her, wondering what her reaction would be. He had already chosen his side, and in retrospect it wasn't a hard choice at all. Harry had always treated him as a friend. He had the feeling that Ron, on the other hand, was only nice to him because of Harry.

"Hermione, Harry seems to really care about you and I know you care about him. He probably should be angrier with you than he is. For both of your sakes, I hope you don't drag this on too much longer." Neville quietly gathered his things and got up from the table to follow Harry to the library.

As he left, Hermione finally started to cry. She wished she could find some way to mend all of the broken friendships between herself, Ron, and Harry. Harry didn't seem to think it was possible, and Ron had given no indication he was interested in doing so. 'How did things get so messed up?' she asked herself as she tried leave the Great Hall before anyone could see her crying. She didn't notice, however, that two tables over a certain blond Slytherin had been watching the entire scene since Hermione came in with more interest than anyone would have expected. Daphne sighed, hoping her Gryffindor friend could make it out of this situation without being hurt too badly.

"Settle down and get your seats. Weasley! Ten points from Gryffindor for being unprepared." The Gryffindors in the class groaned as Professor Snape docked more points from their house, like he did in every class. Most of them had learned by now not to fight it, losing

points was inevitable in this class. Ron Weasley, however, seemed to have missed that memo.

"But that's not fair! Look at Malfoy, he has less of his stuff out than me!" Ron argued. And it was true, Draco wasn't even at his table and all of his potions supplies were still put up. Not that it mattered to Professor Snape.

"Ten more points from Gryffindor for talking back to a teacher. I suggest you be quiet unless you wish to spend tonight in detention." Ron finally seemed to get the hint and sat down, clearly still angry about losing twenty points. Harry and Neville watched from their table at the other side of the room, each happy that Snape had not picked them to pick on today.

"For the next two weeks you will be split into pairs to work on a new assignment. Each pair will be given the ingredients for a type of poison, but not the name of the poison or instructions on how to brew it. You and your partners must not only identify the poison and brew it successfully, but must also determine the antidote and brew that as well. The poisons I have picked for you may be obscure, so I do not expect any of you to be successful." Snape explained. "Ever since the delegations from Durmstrang and Beauxbatons arrived the Headmaster has become obsessed with increasing cooperation amongst young wizards and witches. Therefore, he has requested that any class groups consist of students from different houses. The pairs for this assignment will all have one student from Slytherin, and one from Gryffindor."

All of the students groaned at this announcement, while Professor Snape just looked mildly amused at their unhappiness.

"All of the pairs have been randomly picked. When I call your names come to the front of the room, pick up your ingredients list, and find a table to sit at with your new partner. I suggest you use today's class to determine what poison you have been assigned." With that he began to call out names. Neville was paired with Blaise Zabini, Hermione with Vincent Crabbe, and to Harry's amusement Ron was partnered with Draco Malfoy. Harry felt relieved, he didn't want to work with the blond idiot either.

"Daphne Greengrass... and Harry Potter." Professor Snape finally called out. Harry looked over at Daphne who had an exaggerated look of disgust on her face, but when she looked at Harry he saw a small smile that was quickly hidden. They both walked up to the front to receive their list of ingredients, but when they turned to find a desk Snape stopped them. "Ms Greengrass, let me assure you that you will not be punished for your partner's ignorance."

"Thank you Professor, I had feared my grade for this assignment would be unusually low." Daphne said as she glared at Harry. Harry spotted an empty table towards the back of the room and motioned for Daphne to follow towards it. When they finally sat down Harry heard his partner start to laugh quietly.

"What was that all about?" Harry asked her.

"Sorry Potter, but look at it from my side. Professor Snape just promised me a better grade than our project deserves, what was I supposed to do? Say, 'No thanks sir, I don't want the free points'?"

Harry nodded, knowing she had a good point. "Well I'm glad it worked out like this anyway. I was trying to find a way to talk to you, and this just made it a lot easier."

"Is this about my offer a few weeks ago?" she asked, speaking in whispers so that they would not be overheard.

"Yes. I know what the first task is going to be. I probably shouldn't say much more here, but why don't we meet tonight in the library after dinner to work on this assignment. Then I can explain about the tournament and show you what I've been working on."

"Sounds interesting, just what have you been doing these past few weeks?"

"You'll see, I promise." Harry answered. Daphne realized she wouldn't be able to get anymore information out of Harry until later and decided to start working on their potions project. An hour later when the class ended none of the groups had been able to find a

potion which contained their ingredients in the fourth year potions book. 'I should have known that Snape wouldn't make the assignment that easy.' Harry thought.

"Alright Potter, I'll see you in the library after dinner. Don't be late." Daphne said in her most intimidating tone of voice. Harry was laughing on the inside, knowing that she was just trying to keep up appearances. Harry thought this game was pretty funny as well.

"Fine Greengrass. Try not to get lost." Harry said in an equally harsh voice. Daphne huffed at him, turned away, and walked out the door without speaking another word. They somehow both managed to hold in their laughter.

Harry rushed into the library and began looking for Daphne. Off to one side he saw Hermione, who had not noticed him coming in. She didn't seem to notice Viktor Krum staring at her from a few tables over, either. Harry shrugged it off, deciding it was really none of his business. He was about to start looking down the aisles when he heard someone calling his name,

"Potter! Over here." Daphne was sitting at a table in the corner that was surrounded on three sides by bookshelves. It would make a good place for them to be able to talk and not be overheard. Harry set down his bag and sat down at the table. "So what took you so long? I've been here for fifteen minutes and you left dinner before I did."

"Sorry, I got stopped by Professor Moody."

"Ah. I think that weirdo has been hit with a few too many curses."

"Maybe. He kept asking what I was doing to prepare for the tournament."

"And what did you tell him?" Daphne asked, interested in how Harry would deal with the curious professor.

"Not much, I didn't want him to know that I know what the first task is."

"I'll make a Slytherin out of you yet, Potter." she laughed.

"So, how much of the project do you want to do tonight?" Harry asked, changing topics.

"Let's at least find the name of our poison and how to make it. Once we do that we should easily be able to find the antidote."

"What makes you think that?"

"I owled home today and asked my father to send his copy of '1001 Poisons and Their Antidotes'. Apparently the Hogwarts library doesn't carry it because it is a 'dark' book. Useful is more like it."

"So we could just wait and find our potion then, too."

"Quit being lazy. Here, look through this for our potion." she said as she tossed a book his way. Harry grumbled, but obliged. A half hour later their efforts were rewarded. "Hey, I think this is it!" Harry said excitedly as he passed the book to Daphne.

"The Draught of Everlasting Night..." she read, "... will blind anyone who ingests it. After approximately 48 hours the effect will become permanent if the antidote has not been taken."

"And all of the instructions we will need to make it are here, too. Let's copy this down and then get out of here." Daphne nodded in agreement and began writing down the instructions while Harry copied the notes on the potion's effects and other properties.

Another fifteen minutes and they were walking out the door, headed for the third floor classroom where Harry had been training himself for the last few weeks. Once inside Harry cast locking charms on the door and silencing charms on the room to prevent people from listening. He had known basic versions of the charms even before he began training, but the versions he was now using were far more advanced. Daphne noticed.

"Nice, Potter. I'm surprised you know those. They are sixth year spells aren't they?"

"Yes. So far I am about a third of the way through the sixth year books for Defense, Charms, and Transfiguration. I have been studying those three almost nonstop since that day we talked by the lake."

"So that's what you've been doing, learning more spells?"

"Well, that and trying to make myself stronger. I figured out if I push myself really hard that after I've been able to rest I feel stronger than I did before." Daphne looked a little confused by this statement.

"Potter, what do you mean? How much magic are you using to do that?"

"Generally I just use the most powerful spells I know for as long as I can until I don't have the energy to do them any more. By the time I'm done it takes all the concentration I've got to cast a simple Lumos."

"You really shouldn't be doing that. It takes days to recover from magical exhaustion like you are talking about, and I don't know what is going on but doing that to yourself is not supposed make you stronger. Something else must be happening here."

"It doesn't take days. After a good night of sleep and a big breakfast I feel ready to do it again."

"Still, it just isn't possible that beating yourself up every night is going to make you stronger. You could actually be doing real damage to your magic." Daphne responded with a still slightly confused look on her face.

"I don't think so, but I will stop until I've had a chance to look into it a little more. Good enough?" Daphne nodded in agreement. "Now, about the first task. I have to get past a dragon and steal a golden egg from its nest."

"Hmm, I guess you've already looked up spells that are useful against dragons?"

“There are a few that might work. Their eyes are weaker than the rest of their bodies, so it might be possible for me to blind it and get to the egg that way. Neville and I have been trying to find something that might distract it.”

“Longbottom?” she asked skeptically.

“He’s a lot smarter than people give him credit for. Apparently wolves sometimes attack dragon nests and try and steal the eggs, so dragons naturally hate them. I’ve been working on transfiguring a rock into a wolf.”

“Can you do it?” she asked.

“Not as good as I would like, but it will be ready in time. So far the best plan I have come up with is to transfigure a couple of wolves, fire my best spells at the dragon, and hope I can grab the egg in the confusion.”

“Risky, but it could work. I’ll think about it, maybe I can come up with something you hadn’t considered.” As Daphne concentrated on the problem Harry focused on his new friend. He knew she was very smart, but unlike Hermione her first reaction would not be to surround herself in books and hope the answer to a problem could be that way. Harry realized that he enjoyed having a Slytherin point of view around and wondered, not for the first time, why the bitter rivalry between their two houses had been allowed to continue. It also angered him that they both felt the need to hide their friendship. People like Draco Malfoy and Ron Weasley would never leave them alone if they knew.

“Do you think I should tell Cedric Diggory about the dragons?” Harry asked, breaking the silence which had overtaken the room for the past few minutes.

“That depends.” Daphne answered. “Are you merely trying to survive this tournament, or do you want to win it?” Harry paused to consider that question for a moment, taking out his wand and staring at it as if it knew what he should say.

“At first, I was shocked about being forced into this tournament. When I realized there was no backing out I felt overwhelmed and a little scared, but now I think I may have a shot to do well here.” He answered, finally looking up at Daphne with a smile. “I want to win.” Daphne grinned back at Harry and found herself fighting off the strange urge to hug him.

“I was hoping you would say that. In that case, don’t tell Diggory. Never give up an advantage over the competition if you don’t have to. We’ll find a way to beat your dragon.” she said confidently.

“I wasn’t so sure before, but I believe we will. Now, let me show you those spells I was working on...”

For the next hour Harry demonstrated for her all of the spells he hoped would help him against the dragon. Daphne was impressed not just by the number of spells he used, but by the power with which he was able to cast them. Clearly he was strong for his age, his ability to successfully produce a patronus had proved that to her, but she found herself wondering just how powerful her friend really was.

The next morning Harry received a letter during breakfast from an owl he did not recognize. Seeing that the letter was signed ‘Padfoot’ he quickly hid it and shooed the owl away. Harry looked around, trying to determine if anyone had noticed his letter, but most of them were busy receiving their own mail. Excusing himself, Harry left the Great Hall to go back to his room and read the letter.

Harry,

Be in the Gryffindor common room tonight at 11 PM.

Make sure you’re alone.

-Padfoot

Harry grinned happily; he was excited to talk to his godfather again and wondered what kind of advice he might have. He spent the rest of the day impatiently watching the clock, wishing he could make time move a little faster. After dinner he trained as hard as ever, for the

moment forgetting his promise to Daphne, hoping it would help him pass the time. Eventually Harry was exhausted and it was almost 11, so he made his way back to the common room which was thankfully empty. He wasn't quite sure what he was supposed to do if someone had been there. As the clock chimed, Harry wondered what exactly he was waiting for. His question was answered when the fireplace began to spark and a head came out of the fire.

"Sirius!"

"Hey kid. Sorry it took so long. I've wanted to talk to you for weeks, but I have to keep on the move."

"Don't worry about it, I understand."

"Harry, I have to know. Did you put your name in the Goblet of Fire?"

"No, I don't know how it happened."

"In that case you need to be very careful. Someone is trying to manipulate you or get you hurt. You need to be on the look out for anyone acting suspiciously. Get your friends to help."

Harry snorted at his godfather's comment. "If you mean Ron and Hermione, then I'm out of luck. They didn't believe me when I told them I didn't put my name in the cup."

"Fools! And Hermione had seemed so smart when we met."

"I still have a few friends, like Neville Longbottom, but most of the students think I am an attention seeking cheater."

"Longbottom? I knew his parents, good people. Now, about the tournament, what do you know?"

"I'm not supposed to know this, but the first task is dragons. I'm working on a plan."

"Good. Listen Harry, I have to go. The place I'm talking to you from isn't secure. Keep your friends close. Forgive Ron and Hermione if

they deserve it, but be careful. I learned the hard way that a friend can betray you. Good night, Harry. I will stay in touch when possible.

“Good night, Sirius.” With that the face in the fire disappeared, leaving Harry alone to think about the things his godfather had told him. Sirius was right; he needed to place more importance on finding out who entered him into the tournament. Who knows what else they might have planned for him. Harry yawned, decided to wait until tomorrow to start worrying, and went to bed.

“Potter, stay behind.” Professor Moody commanded as the class let out. Harry sighed, wondering what was going on. When the last student had left, Moody sat down at his desk and motioned for Harry to take a nearby seat.

“So, what are you going to do about the first task?”

“What do you mean, sir?”

“The dragon, boy! Hagrid showed you the dragons last night, did he not?”

“Professor, I really have no idea what you are talking about. I haven’t talked to Hagrid in a few days.”

“Hmm, he told me he got that Weasley boy to give you a note telling you to meet him last night. You didn’t get the note, did you?”

“No. I’m not really surprised; Ron and I aren’t exactly friendly right now.” Harry explained.

“I see. Well, let me explain to you what you should have seen. You’re going to have to get by a dragon and take something from it. So lad, what are you going to do?”

“I don’t know sir.” Harry answered, pretending that he had not spent weeks thinking about the problem.

“You have to play to your strengths. Like Quidditch, I hear you are good on a broom.”

“That’s true. But will I be allowed to bring my broom?”

“Of course not, but there is nothing in the rules that says you can’t summon it. You know the Accio charm, don’t you?”

Harry nodded and answered “Yes sir. I could do that.” Privately, Harry was thinking that it was a great idea. On his broom he could move much faster, allowing him to get the egg easier. “Thank you, Professor. I’ll keep thinking about it.”

Professor Moody smiled oddly at him, before taking a flask out of his coat and gulping down its contents. Harry got his things and left, wondering why his professor was so interested in his plans for the tournament.

The first task was only two days away. Harry thought that with using Moody’s idea to summon his Firebolt he had a better than average chance at completing the task. He was currently in the third floor classroom he had taken over practicing his summoning when he heard a knock on the door.

‘I remembered to cast that silencing charm, didn’t I?’ Harry wondered. Checking again, he found the charm in place. So whoever it is must have known he was in the room. And the only person that knew he came here was...

“Hello Greengrass.” Harry said as he opened the door for her. She came in with an excited look on her face.

“I’ve got an idea, Potter. It is going to sound crazy, but I think it is worth a try.”

“Ok, what is it?” he asked.

“Let me explain. The wizarding world has a lot of stories that parents tell their children in order to teach them some moral or idea. Some of the ‘darker’ families, including mine, tell a collection of stories starring Salazar Slytherin which are supposed to teach proper behavior for a

Slytherin. I'm guessing that you, a Gryffindor raised by muggles, haven't heard of them?"

"No. They sound like fairy tales though, are you sure these stories aren't just made up?"

"I pretty certain that they were just made up, but every story has a little bit of truth to it. And the story I am thinking of is called 'Salazar and the Dragon'."

Harry laughed, "So let me guess, it's story time now right?"

"Exactly. Now I'm not sure exactly how it goes, so I am just going to give you the basic story. One day Salazar Slytherin was chasing an enemy through the forest and stumbled onto a dragon. The dragon was going to attack him, but Slytherin managed to convince it that he meant her no harm. He warned the dragon that there was another wizard in the forest that would hurt her and her children. The dragon, thankful for the warning, let Slytherin go. A few hours later Slytherin found his enemy and realized he was heading towards the dragon, so Slytherin made no attempt to capture the enemy and let him face the dragon. When the dragon saw the other wizard she immediately killed him and fed his remains to her young."

"Well that was a gruesome story, but what is the point?" Harry interrupted.

"Quiet, I'm not done. Anyway, Slytherin made his way back to the village and told his cousin about what had happened. The cousin was jealous, and desired to have his own dragon to command. So he went into the forest, found the dragon, and ordered her to do his bidding. The dragon was offended by this and killed him as well. So what do you think?"

"You guys are raised with stories like this? What was that even supposed to teach?"

"Slytherin was smart and let the dragon take care of his enemy for him. Also, the cousin was stupid and disrespected a potential ally."

“Ok, but people can’t talk to dragons. I’ve read a bunch of books by dragon handlers and none of them could do it.”

“But you’re forgetting Salazar Slytherin was a parseltongue. And that ability is hereditary, meaning that his cousin could have been one as well and that is why he was able to talk to the dragon. Parseltongues are very rare, so it isn’t surprising that none of the dragon handling books would mention it.” Daphne stated proudly.

“So you want me to talk a dragon into giving me an egg from its nest?”

“It’s not a real egg.” She pointed out.

“And this entire idea is based on children’s story.” Harry said, still wondering what to do with the idea.

“Yes, but what could it hurt to try? You already have a back up plan.”

“Fine, I’ll try it. But if the dragon bites my head off while I am trying to strike up a conversation I am going to haunt you.”

“And Nearly Headless Nick would be so jealous that you get to go on the Headless Hunt. Where is the downside, Potter?”

Harry and Daphne both started laughing, and for a while Harry’s worries about the tournament lifted and his thoughts were focused on how much he enjoyed the company of his new friend.

Author's note on characters and their personalities:

One of my goals with this story was to keep the characters close to how they are portrayed in the books, but allow them to change in reasonable ways which all link together. I see every small change in personality as either a direct or indirect result of Harry meeting Daphne in first year. For example, Daphne prevents Harry from taking Ron's point of view that all Slytherins are evil. Because of this, Harry is able to realize that the typically Slytherin traits of cunning and ambition aren't evil. The Sorting Hat had pretty much confirmed that Harry had the potential to have those traits in him from the beginning.

So perhaps Harry has become a little more cunning than the books portray over the years. Hermione's out of character reaction to his name being pulled out of the Goblet of Fire could be a reaction to that small change. As for Ron, I assume that the fact that Hermione did believe Harry in the books introduced a little doubt into his mind regarding his accusations towards Harry. But in this case he sees Hermione's disbelief as confirming his suspicions and thus his reaction is a little more extreme. Neville seems braver in this story, but my point of view on his bravery is that it has to be brought out by his sense of loyalty and friendship. In other words he is willing to be brave for his friends, but reluctant to be brave for himself.

In any event, the main idea is that one small change in the past can cause large changes in the future. It's all different now, so let's see where it takes us.

And a special thank you to everyone who has given me encouragement, criticism, tips, and ideas for this. It makes me want to keep going.

The day of the first task had finally arrived. It started like most others, with Harry rising early in order to avoid his roommates. After completing his morning grooming rituals, Harry sat for almost ten minutes staring at the athletic robes he had been given to wear during the first challenge. They were a lot like his Quidditch robes, prompting him to remember that in any normal year he would be preparing to play Seeker for Gryffindor and only worrying about catching the snitch before the other team's seeker could. But this year, instead of facing rival seekers and incoming bludgers, he would be facing a fully grown dragon. All things considered, he'd much rather be playing Quidditch. Deciding he didn't have time to day dream, Harry pulled on his robes and walked to the Great Hall for breakfast. He knew that even more attention than usual would be on him today, but he hoped he could make it through the meal without any major distractions.

As Harry walked in the hall all conversation seemed to cease, and every head turned to look at him. 'I guess I should have known this was coming' he thought with a sigh. Seeing Neville already seated and eating a stack of pancakes, Harry walked over to the Gryffindor table and sat down across from him.

"Hey Neville."

"Morning. You ready for this, Harry?" his friend asked.

"As ready as I will ever be I suppose. I've got a plan A and a plan B, so I am more prepared for this than I have been for just about all of my previous adventures. I think I will make it through the day in one piece." Harry added with laugh.

"Huh? What's this plan B?"

"You'll see, I've got to keep a few surprises to myself. I wonder if the others know what is coming like I do."

"You said Professor Moody warned you, so obviously it isn't a very well kept secret. I am sure Karkaroff and Maxine found out and told their champions, and Moody probably would have said something to Cedric if he said something to you."

"You are probably right. There would almost have to be a system in place to make sure we are prepared, otherwise most of the champions would die."

"Plenty of people have died in this tournament before, Harry." Neville reminded him.

"Is that really what you want to be telling me right now?" Harry asked with a sarcastic grin.

"Oh man! I'm sorry, I didn't even think about how that sounded before I said it. I'm sure you will do great."

"Don't worry about it, I was only kidding around with you anyway. You know what this feels like to me? The morning of the first Quidditch match of the year. It's just about always against Slytherin, and so everyone is paying attention. Even the Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs. Every time I know that if we're going to win I have to catch the snitch, because our teams are usually close enough for it to come down to that. When I was younger that kind of pressure almost made me want to curl up into a ball and go back to bed, but something in me must have changed since then. Now I just feel excited, and I know that I won't calm down until they call my name and I go out there to compete. Does that make any sense to you?"

"Sure it does. I've heard lots of professional athletes talk like that. Did you ever think of playing Quidditch after you graduate? I bet you're good enough."

"We'll see." Harry answered, but he personally doubted that would happen. Quidditch was fun and challenging, but that alone would not be enough to keep him interested. His thoughts on the subject were completely interrupted when he felt a pair of arms swing around his body and pull him into a tight hug. He turned to see who it was and quickly decided he wasn't in any danger.

"Good morning, Hermione. It's nice to see you, too."

"Oh Harry, you're going to be careful aren't you? I should have been there with you, helping you get ready!" she sobbed as she hugged him tighter and cried into his shoulder.

"Hey, Hermione. It's ok, I'm going to be just fine." Harry said, trying to comfort her. He turned his head towards Neville and looked at his friend with a confused look on his face. Neville responded by shrugging and mouthing the words 'I have no idea' to him. "Come on, why don't we sit down and you can tell me what's on your mind." Hermione nodded in agreement and finally let go of her hold on him. As they sat down she tried wipe the tears out of her eyes with her sleeves.

"I had no right to doubt you, Harry. I've just been so scared of losing the only friendships I've ever had. But if I have to choose, I choose you Harry. Ron has been a real git, but I guess so have I."

"Just a little, Hermione." Harry said with a small smile.

"I know you said things can't be like they were before, but I hope you will be able to forgive me."

"Not today, maybe not even soon. But probably one day, yes." Harry assured her, which resulted in another hug.

"I'm worried about you, Harry. This tournament is so dangerous, you could get hurt!"

"Don't worry about it. I know exactly what I am doing. Just because I didn't have you around doesn't mean I haven't been preparing for this. That's just about all I have been doing since my name came out of that bloody cup. In fact, I even have a plan A and a plan B." Harry said proudly.

"You have a plan B? Who are you and what have you done with Harry Potter?" Hermione asked sarcastically. "Wait a minute, if you have a plan that means... you know what the first task is going to be!"

"Of course I do, but keep quiet about it. I don't want everyone to know."

"Well, what is it?" she asked excitedly.

"You can find out in a couple of hours along with the rest of Hogwarts." Hermione did not look happy with his decision, but knew better than to badger him about it. The rift in their friendship could not be healed in one sitting, and she decided she would much rather have her friend back than know what the first task was a few hours early.

"That's fine, Harry. I will still be there cheering for you."

"Did you hear that Neville, my cheering section just doubled in size!" Harry said with a laugh.

"Then I guess we will just have to be really loud." Neville responded.

"Good! I better go, I have to meet with guys in charge of the tournament before everything starts. I'll see you both after I finish up, ok?" His friends both nodded as he walked towards the exit. His eyes drifted over to the Slytherin table where he saw Daphne send a smile his way. Harry smiled back, and both of them thought of how annoying it was to have to hide the friendship that was quickly becoming the most important one they had. Daphne was glad that Hermione had decided to try and repair her broken friendship with Harry. She knew Harry would have been sad if that friendship had died. After all, she had seen him once before when he thought he had lost her...

Two years earlier...

Daphne walked into the hospital wing hoping to get some headache potion. She had just been cornered by Draco Malfoy who, after telling her that he had chosen her to be his girlfriend and that she should feel honored, had tried to kiss her. Daphne acted on instinct and headbutted the arrogant fool as he leaned his head towards her. He fell to the ground in shock, giving Daphne the opportunity to pull out her wand and stun him. She had left him laying unconscious on the cold stone floor near the entrance to the Slytherin dorms. Someone would eventually find him and wake him up, at which point he was

going to be pissed. Daphne didn't worry too much about that, she was not afraid of him and if he tried anything else she was going to show him why. Painfully.

Her thoughts of revenge were interrupted when she noticed that she was not alone in the room. Harry Potter was sitting in a chair at the foot of a hospital bed towards the other end of the room. Hermione Granger lay petrified in the bed, the latest addition to Hogwarts's odd collection of petrified students. Harry had not noticed her coming in and she considered leaving before he did notice her, but he looked like he needed someone to talk to.

"Are you ok, Potter?" she asked as his head jerked up in surprise. Eventually he shrugged and motioned for her to sit down.

"I'm fine, but Hermione isn't. Neither are all of the other kids who have been attacked. I wish I knew what to do."

"What is there for you to do? It's not your responsibility to be everyone's hero."

"Maybe not everyone, but I think I owe it to her."

"Ah, I see. I didn't know you two were together."

"What? No, it's nothing like that. Hermione is my best friend. I never had any friends before I came to Hogwarts, my stupid whale of a cousin made sure of that, so when I got here and met her and Ron it was just really nice to have people who cared about you. They are both like the family I never got to have. Seeing Hermione like this makes me feel bad, like I had let my sister get hurt or something." Harry said as he looked up at Daphne. She had reacted to his statement much stronger than he thought she would, to the point where he thought he saw tears welling up in her eyes. "Are you ok?"

"Fine, I just know exactly what you mean." she answered while wiping her eyes with her hand. "They are all going to be ok, Potter. As soon as the mandrakes have been harvested the potion to wake them up will be ready and you will have your friend back."

"You don't like Hermione very much, do you?" Daphne was surprised by his question, but decided to answer it anyway.

"I wouldn't say that I care enough to even dislike her, but no not really."

"Why not?" Harry asked, interested in how others saw his friend.

"It has nothing to do with her being a muggleborn, if that is what you are asking. It's more in her attitude. She tries so hard to prove that she is good little witch that sometimes she ends up putting down others who don't deserve it. I bet she treats you and Weasley like you would be incapable of studying or passing your classes without her."

"I wouldn't be that harsh on her... and she does try to get us to study when we would rather do other things." he said in defense of his friend.

"I thought so. It doesn't really matter anyway, who is going to notice if a Slytherin isn't the best of friends with a Gryffindor?"

"True. So what are you doing here?" he asked.

"Headache potion. Malfoy was being a prick so I headbutted him. I'm not bruising am I?" she asked as she pulled her hair away from her forehead. Harry grinned when he saw the red spot where their heads had connected. He also noticed, not for the first time, how pretty she was.

"It's a little red, but I think you are going to live." he pronounced.

"Well thank you, Healer Potter."

"Actually, I prefer Doctor Potter."

"You might as well be a muggle." she laughed with a small shake of her head. Harry had even broken out of his bad mood long enough to smile back at her. "I really do hope your friend gets better, Potter. Try not to worry so much." As she said this she stood up and began

walking out of the room, completely forgetting the headache potion she had come for.

Harry was the first of the champions to make it to the tent next to the dragon's nest. Professor McGonagall had wished him luck and told him to wait for everyone else to arrive before leaving him to sit and review his plans. He felt confident that he would be able to grab the golden egg, but he was starting to have doubts about Daphne's plan. Even if it did work, the wizarding world might not look too kindly on a public display of his parselmouth talents. 'On the other hand, why should I care? It's not like they have been treating me well to begin with' he thought with a frown. Deciding it wasn't worth worrying about at the moment, he decided to go through the exercises Oliver Wood had the Gryffindor Quidditch team do before every match. Harry had no idea if they actually helped physically, but it did help him mentally prepare. A few minutes later Harry looked up to see Cedric Diggory walk in.

"Hey Harry." the Hufflepuff champion said, seemingly quite nervous.

"Hi, Cedric. Are you ok?"

"What? Oh yeah, I'm fine. Just a little excited is all." Harry nodded and didn't press any further. Cedric began to pace back and forth, softly muttering something to himself.

Soon Viktor Krum and Fleur Delacour had also arrived. The four champions spent several minutes looking at their competition, trying to determine who would be the biggest threat. They all knew that Krum was considered the favorite to win the competition, with Cedric a close second. Each of them seemed to handle the stress differently, Harry noted. Once the other champions had arrived, Cedric had adopted a confident face and a small grin. Krum, on the other hand, never seemed to stop scowling at his competition while Fleur seemed just seemed bored.

"Excellent, you're all here!" a booming voice came from the opening of the tent. Harry turned to see Ludo Bagman walking in with two assistants. "Now, gather around and I will explain the first task to you." Harry calmly walked over to Bagman, much like Krum and Fleur.

Cedric, however, seemed the most eager to hear what Bagman had to say.

“Today you must recover a golden egg, within which is a clue for your next task. In order to obtain the egg, however, you must make your way past a dragon. You will have thirty minutes to complete the task.” Only Cedric reacted to the news, paling significantly. “There are four dragons, and in order to determine which one you will face you must reach into this bag and pull out a representation of that dragon. Ladies first, Ms. Delacour.” He said as he offered her the bag. Fleur reached in and pulled out a small green dragon with a number 2 on a chain around its neck.

“Ah, the common Welsh green. Very good, you will go second. Mr. Diggory?” Cedric reluctantly put his hand in the bag and withdrew his dragon, which had a number 1 on it. “The Swedish Short-Snout! Excellent.” Cedric gulped and held the tiny dragon up to his face, inspecting it.

“You’re next, Mr. Krum.” Viktor Krum scowled and pulled out his dragon, which had a 3 on it. “The Chinese Fireball. Which means you, Mr. Potter, will be facing the Hungarian Horntail.” Harry pulled his dragon out of the bag, and recognized it from his studies as one of the most aggressive dragons in the world.

“You have twenty minutes to prepare yourself, Mr. Diggory. Good luck to all of you.” Bagman said as he waved at them and left. Once he was gone Cedric walked over to a bench and sat down, deep in thought. Every so often he would glance at the miniature dragon, looking for inspiration.

‘He has no idea what to expect.’ Harry realized. ‘But Krum and Delacour do. So do I, for that matter. Why would Moody tell me and not Cedric? I can’t just let him die out there...’ Harry sighed and walked over to the bench where Cedric was sitting. The older boy looked up at him suspiciously, wondering what he wanted.

“Cedric, did you know that wolves and dogs are natural enemies of dragons? Or that the flame freezing charm will provide a few moments of protection against dragon fire? Just some things to think

about, I suppose.” Harry started to walk away when Cedric’s voice stopped him.

“Why are you helping me?”

“I still want to win, but I would rather not see you get burnt to a crisp out there either. Good luck, Cedric.” Harry walked back over to where he had been sitting, wondering if it was smart to have given up a few key points to his backup plan. ‘Oh well, I did only mention one spell and he probably would never consider summoning a broom.’ Harry sat back down and listened to the noise from the growing crowd outside the tent. Another voice, this one much louder, was explaining the rules of the task to them and announcing the order in which they would face the dragons. Time seemed to drag on for him as his anticipation built. Finally, one of Bagman’s assistants came into the tent and motioned for Cedric to follow him.

“You’re up, Mr. Diggory.” Cedric nodded and gave a brief thumbs up to Harry before walking out of the tent to the roar of an approving crowd. The other champions were not allowed to watch as that would give them an unfair advantage, but there was nothing stopping them from listening.

The crowd alternately gasped and cheered, but clearly Cedric had not yet been able to get the golden egg. Eventually the announcer declared that Cedric only had 15, then 10, and then 5 minutes left to successfully complete the task. When the one minute warning was given the crowd cheered louder than ever, Cedric was making a desperate last minute attempt to get the egg. The cheering continued until it was announced that his time had run out, and then a huge groan of disappointment was heard. Harry noticed a door on the tent fly open and Cedric walked in. He was covered in dirt and small scratches while part of his robes seemed to have been burned off, but other than that he looked fine. Cedric looked his way and shrugged. Harry guessed he was happy to get out of there in one piece.

“Ms. Delacour, your dragon is ready.” the assistant said a few minutes later. At this the bored expression finally dropped from her face. She nodded nervously, took a deep breath, and walked out of

the tent to face her dragon. The fans were not quite as loud for her as they had been for Cedric, but when she was able to put the dragon to sleep and take the egg fifteen minutes later a huge cheer rose from the crowd to congratulate her. Fleur slowly made it back to the tent, careful not to put much weight on one of her ankles which she had sprained trying to avoid her dragon's tail.

Viktor Krum was the next to go, and as he left the tent Harry did not wonder if he would get the egg but how long it would take him. Krum, besides being an excellent Seeker, was supposedly very magically powerful. From the sounds of the crowd, Krum seemed to be fighting the dragon head on. There was a moment when the crowd screamed and went completely silent. Harry's head shot up, wondering what had happened to the other champion, when an enormous cheer signaled to him that Krum must have made it past whatever danger he was in. A similar roar of approval was heard minutes later when Krum was finally able to reach the golden egg. He had taken nearly three minutes less to get it than Delacour did. Harry now knew that if he wanted to place first in this part of the tournament he would have to get his egg in less than twelve minutes. Krum did not look good when he came back in the tent. He had a long gash down his left arm and much of his right side had apparently received burns that, though they were not life threatening, appeared to be quite painful.

'Should be doable, I hope.' Harry thought. His nervousness faded into anticipation as he waited for the dragon handlers to remove Krum's dragon and bring in the Hungarian Horntail. It was taking longer this time than it had after the other two competitors. The assistant finally came back in the tent and Harry leapt to his feet.

"Sorry, Mr. Potter. It will be just a few more minutes. Your dragon does not seem to want to cooperate." he explained. Harry groaned, cursing his luck. "OK, our apologies about the delay. You can go now, good luck." Harry thanked the man and walked out of the tent. The crowd cheered for him louder than he had expected, and a large smile spread across his face. His moment of happiness was interrupted by the Earth shaking roar of the Hungarian Horntail. The dragon was simply enormous. Its black hide was covered in ridges and spikes that made its lizard-like form appear even more deadly. As Harry continued to walk towards the dragon it raised its head and

let loose a blast of fire that he thought must have been forty feet long. When he finally reached the starting area a cannon fired signaling that his time had started.

"OK, Harry, here we go." he said to himself. "Remember, don't show fear. Hagrid says many animals can sense it." At this point the dragon finally noticed his approach and turned to face him, roaring so loud that the crowd could not even be heard. Harry took out his wand, placed it to his throat, and called out "Sonus!"

"Greetings, great and noble dragon." Harry hissed in Parseltongue with his magically amplified voice. The dragon's roar lowered to a vicious sounding growl which Harry hoped was a good sign. The crowd, meanwhile, had stopped cheering completely. A few screams and gasps could be heard, but for the most part the spectators were oddly quiet. "I mean you no harm." Harry continued. The dragon glared at him, her growl had not lowered any and smoke was starting to come out of her nostrils. 'Perhaps this wasn't my best idea,' Harry thought 'but on the bright side she hasn't killed me yet. Although I am still not convinced she understands me. I know I don't understand her.'

"I have come to warn you. One of the eggs you guard is not your own." Harry seemed to have finally caught the dragon's attention with this statement. The dragon turned back towards her egg and sniffed them, eventually finding the golden egg. Enraged, the horntail let out a roar so loud that most of the audience was forced to clap their hands around their ears. "That egg was placed there by the same men who even now keep you in chains." This angered the dragon even more, and Harry started to worry that maybe he should not have said that. He and Daphne had discussed what he would say to the dragon the previous night, and had ended up with a small script designed to gain the dragon's favor. 'It was a lot easier reciting the script to Daphne than to a fully grown Hungarian Horntail.' Harry realized nervously. Meanwhile, fear was beginning to spread in the audience. They could not understand what was being said, but every time Harry spoke the dragon seemed to get angrier. And in the middle of it all was Harry Potter, still standing tall and proud in front of the dragon with no fear at all showing on his face. They couldn't know that on the inside all he wanted to do was turn and run. A few people

had already decided that now was a good time to leave. Harry had come out of the tent less than five minutes ago, but in that short amount of time he had managed to spread panic throughout the crowd.

"Please, my friend, allow me to take that false egg far away from here so that you can protect your young." The dragon stopped growling at Harry's request and seemed to look closely at him, as if trying to judge his reliability. After a few moments the dragon turned back to the pile of eggs and using her long, forked tongue grabbed the golden egg and put it in her mouth. 'Uh oh...' Harry thought 'I wonder if I will lose points because my dragon ate my egg.' Harry was considering what to do next when the dragon lowered her head to the ground so that she could stare directly at Harry. He had thought the horntail was big before, but he realized that he had vastly underestimated her size. The dragons head was almost twice as tall as he was. Her mouth, which was close enough to him that Harry could feel her hot breath on him, was filled with teeth the size of his legs. With one small snort of flame, Harry knew, he would be dead. But he remained standing still and looking confident, fully aware that any mistake now could be fatal. Slowly the dragon began to open her mouth as the screams in the audience grew louder. Even some of the professors could be heard yelling for the dragon handlers to come to Harry's rescue.

Suddenly the dragon's dark tongue was forced out of her mouth. And to the shock of those brave souls still watching, it was wrapped around Harry's golden egg. The Horntail gently placed the egg on the ground in front of Harry and unwrapped her tongue from around it. "Thank you." Harry hissed sincerely. Nobody, not even Harry, was expecting the dragon's response. Her tongue, which had never made it back to her mouth, whipped out and gave Harry a full body lick starting at his ankles and ending at the top of his head. His black hair, which was always a mess anyway, was now covered in dragon spit and pointing in every direction imaginable. Harry, who had retained full control of himself until that moment, completely lost that control. He started laughing, not just giggles but huge laughs that made him double over and tears come to his eyes. When he finally managed to stop he looked up at the dragon who he would swear from that day forward had a smile on her face. With that he picked up his egg, waved good-bye to the dragon, and started walking back to the tent.

On his way he looked up to the section where the Slytherins were sitting, hoping to be able to find Daphne, and was surprised at how easy it was to spot her. Apparently a large chunk of the Slytherin student population had decided to leave when Harry started talking to the dragon. He smiled and briefly gave thumbs up, resolving to find her later and thank her for her brilliant idea.

The crowd was completely silent and remained that way for several minutes, except for two Gryffindors who were clapping and cheering as loud as they could. When the judges eventually got around to scoring Harry's performance they quickly awarded him first place.

An hour later Harry, still clutching his golden egg, walked up to the painting of the Fat Lady guarding the Gryffindor dorms. He briefly wondered what he would find inside before saying the password and walking in. Most of Gryffindor was in the common room, talking animatedly about the day's events. When Harry came in most heads turned to look at him with the most common expressions being of awe, confusion, or worry.

"Great job, Harry!" he heard Neville call out and start clapping. Others slowly joined in, but reluctantly and not nearly as enthusiastic. Harry briefly noticed that Ron wasn't clapping, only standing by Ginny and looking at him with a look of suspicion. Fred and George Weasley, who didn't seem to care whether Harry had put his name in the Goblet of Fire or not, quickly rushed over to him and fell on their knees with their heads to the ground.

"All hail Dark Lord Potter!" they shouted, snickering at the gasps their outburst provoked. Harry simply laughed; knowing that they at least had the humor to make fun of what he guessed had been said about him.

"Rise, minions." Harry commanded. "Now, go prank the masses!" Still laughing, he walked over to where Neville and Hermione were standing.

"You probably shouldn't have done that, Harry." Hermione said, "It will probably end up in the Daily Prophet tomorrow." Harry could not tell

whether she was being serious or not, but he had long stopped caring what was printed about him in the tabloids.'

"So what's the egg do, Harry?" Neville asked.

"I'm not sure, think I should open it?" They both nodded, and several curious people who were nearby turned their attention to Harry.

"Here goes nothing..." he said as he opened the egg. Immediately a loud shrieking noise filled the room, prompting groans and calls to "shut it up!" Once he had closed the egg the noise stopped, leaving Harry to wonder what the clue was.

"I think I will worry about this tomorrow. And maybe outside, with ear muffs on." Harry stated. "You guys have fun celebrating my victory, I've got to go get a shower. I'm still covered in dragon spit and am pretty sure I smell awful." No one chose to argue with Harry's statement. Once he had left, the talk turned back to him as people tried to figure out what it meant that Harry could command dragons.

Author's note:

Once again thanks for all the reviews. Judging by them, opinions seemed to be split on whether or not Harry should forgive Hermione or not. Personally, I think he would. Plus, I like her character while Ron's has always annoyed me.

This was a fairly quick update, but the next chapter might be a week away. The real world has a way of intruding on the fictional one like that.

The day after Harry's strange victory in the first task of the Triwizard Tournament all of Hogwarts seemed to be gossiping excitedly about the young champion. Opinions varied on the significance of Harry's actions. His image was not at all helped by the Daily Prophet and its star reporter, Rita Skeeter.

The Boy Who Lived: The Next Dark Lord Or Merely Insane? By Rita Skeeter

In an unexpected turn of events, Harry Potter (age 12) managed to claim first place in the initial task of the Triwizard Tournament. He did not attempt to use transfiguration like Cedric Diggory, or charms like Fleur Delacour, or even brute strength like Viktor Krum. Instead the Boy-Who-Lived used Parseltongue (which has long been a trait shared by dark wizards) to command the fiercest of all dragons to submit to his will and hand over the golden egg. Rumors that Potter is a parselmouth first surfaced two years ago and have now been confirmed in spectacular fashion. We here at the Daily Prophet believe our readers have a right to know just what Harry Potter said to the dragon and whether or not he indeed used the Imperious Curse on the beast (as has been suggested in letters to the editor) in order to emerge victorious.

Of course we should not immediately assume the Mr Potter is destined to be the next Dark Lord. Several Hogwarts students, who wish to remain anonymous, have expressed concerns to this reporter that the stress of the Triwizard Tournament has driven its youngest competitor insane. "Potter's gone completely mad! All of us Slytherins have seen this coming for years, it really shouldn't surprise anyone." one source explained. The strongest evidence for this point of view lies in the behavior of Harry Potter himself. As seen in the photo below, Mr Potter began laughing like a lunatic after gaining complete control over the dragon. So perhaps St Mungos, not Azkaban, lies in the young boy's future. Only time will tell.

By lunchtime almost everyone in Hogwarts had read the article, not to mention the others in the paper also speculating about Harry's sanity and moral fiber. The claim that Harry had the dragon under his command was quickly accepted as fact, and almost as quickly Harry's actions during the previous day became more and more embellished.

The speed and ease at which the events became a strange legend was truly astounding. Only days later those who asked about the tournament were told that Harry had leapt on the dragons back and told it to belch flames at the audience before flying off with the golden egg clutched in his hands. The stories were, of course, ridiculous and almost all of the students knew it. But still, very few made an effort to correct the altered story and so it continued to be told. Harry Potter remained the favorite topic for discussion for a full week, until a surprise announcement thankfully granted him a reprieve.

"Did you read the Prophet this morning, Harry?" Neville asked as they walked to Charms class.

"No, but I've heard what it says. Rubbish. I can't believe people still listen to that hag Rita Skeeter." Harry answered.

"I know, but a lot of people do."

"Well what can I do about it. Even if I let her interview me Skeeter will just twist my words against me like she did last time."

"I guess so."

"Sorry, Neville. I don't mean to take this out on you, it's not your fault." Harry said, hoping his earlier tone didn't sound as harsh as he thought it did. Neville smiled and shrugged, acting like it was not a big deal to begin with. As the two friends neared the classroom loud voiced could be heard from inside arguing about something. Harry's mouth dropped open in surprise when recognized one of the voices.

"That is the stupidest thing I've ever heard. I was there too, and we both know that it didn't happen like that. You're nuts if you think that he is a dark wizard." Ron stated with conviction. Noticing a few of the faces turn and look towards the door, Ron glanced over and saw Harry walking in. "There he is, go ask him yourself." Ron walked over to a desk at the other side of the room and sat down, not even once looking Harry's way again. Harry had not moved, still in shock about what he had heard his old friend say. It wasn't the apology he was

hoping for and Ron still seemed to not care if their friendship was ever repaired, but it was at least nice to know what Ron was not a part of the group declaring that Harry was preparing to unleash a reign of terror across the wizarding world. It saddened him to think that only a month ago he and Ron were the best of friends, and yet now they went out of their way to avoid each other. He hoped that one day they could become friends again, but he really didn't hold out any hope of that happening soon.

Charms class went well. Harry had managed to surprise most of his professors with his steady improvement this year. Even Professor Snape had fewer legitimate reasons to complain about him. Though he didn't know it, the topic had also been discussed at staff meetings. Despite the distraction provided by the tournament Harry's grades had risen significantly and there did not seem to be any spell covered in class that he did not already know. In today's charm class they were discussing the theory behind the vanishing charm. Harry had not bothered to learn theory in his private training, so he sat and listened intently. He was surprised to learn that the charm had many uses other than simply getting rid of unneeded objects. As he sat silently thinking about that a realization hit him that was stunning because it should have been so obvious. 'Of course! I've been so worried about how many spells I know that I haven't been learning how to effectively use the ones I do know!' Harry was mentally kicking himself for his oversight when class ended and everyone began to file out of the classroom.

The feeling of someone quickly reaching into a pocket on his robes and then removing itself snapped Harry out of his internal monologue. He turned his head trying to see who had done it and was found Daphne standing slightly behind him trying her best not to look in his direction. Reaching into his pocket he felt a small piece of parchment which he knew was not previously there. Once he finally made it out of the classroom Harry took out the note and read it. "Meet me in the third floor classroom after dinner. Bring your egg. - DG" He smiled, happy that he finally had the chance to thank Daphne for her brilliant idea for the first task. Daphne had been on his mind a lot recently, Harry realized. While Harry spent almost every night in the forgotten classroom, Daphne had in the past two weeks began to show up every other night or so. Sometimes for just a few minutes, other times

for more than an hour. Normally she simply sat and watched him attempt new spells, giving him advice when he struggled if she was able to. But if she noticed him trying to learn a spell she thought was particularly useful she would join in and try it as well. Harry didn't mind the distraction at all. He even got a strange sense of satisfaction when he was able to help her cast a new spell correctly. He wondered if maybe that meant he would enjoy being a teacher, but also suspected that who he was teaching had a lot to do with his happiness while tutoring Daphne.

Harry realized that he needed to find a way to thank Daphne, but what? That thought stayed on his mind the rest of the day.

Daphne had made it to the empty classroom first and when Harry walked in was practicing the shield charm that he had showed her a few days ago. Harry watched her cast it and every time the shield started strong but quickly faded away. After the third attempt Harry noticed what she was doing wrong.

"Don't twist your wrist so much when you cast." Harry advised, startling Daphne who had been concentrating so hard she had not noticed him come in. She nodded and tried again. This time the shield came up and stayed that way. For a few moments Daphne inspected the shield, looking for flaws. Finding none she let it fade out and turned towards Harry and put her wand away, smiling at her accomplishment. Then, completely shocking Harry, she walked over to him and gave him a brief hug. He did not even think to return it before Daphne pulled away, ending the brief contact.

"Thanks, Potter. You did great in the tournament, too! I knew the parseltongue would work. So were you able to understand the dragon?" she asked excitedly.

"No, I wasn't even sure that the dragon understood me until she started sniffing her eggs. I was almost ready to try the other plan until that happened." Harry answered. "So, do you want to see the egg?"

"Of course I do." Harry set down a bag he had slung over his shoulder and opened it. Daphne looked a little awed when she finally was able to see the golden egg up close. Harry chose not to tell her

anything about the egg, hoping that maybe she would be able to find out something about it that he was not able to. Finding that the top part was a latch, she slowly turned it as Harry recast the silencing charm on the room. As expected, the loud shrieking noise filled the room, causing them both to wince. Daphne, however, did not slam the egg shut like Harry had done. Instead she began to look at the inside of the egg which was filled with swirling lights and colors. After several minutes she closed the egg and looked at it with a thoughtful expression on her face. Harry was about to say something when she opened the egg again and then immediately closed it.

"So, what do you think?" Harry asked.

"I'm not sure. I thought that maybe there was some kind of lock on it and you had to open it a certain way in order for it to work, but it looks like there is only one way to open it."

"So if it isn't about how you open it then there must be something you do once you open it."

"Probably. When is the next task?" Daphne asked.

"Not until the end of January. So I have a while to figure it out."

"I doubt the egg is going to tell you how to beat the next part of the tournament, just to tell you what it is. So you better hope you can figure this out in the next couple of weeks."

"True." Harry gazed at the egg, deep in thought. "Open the egg again, I want to try something" Daphne nodded. opened the egg, and sat it down on a nearby desk. Harry smiled in thanks then raised his and said "Silencio!", casting the silencing charm on the egg. Immediately the shrieking noise stopped, but otherwise the egg remained the same.

"What did you think that would do?" Daphne asked.

"I don't know. It seemed like a good idea at the time. Maybe I should try some other spells on it. How about Incendio?"

"You want to set the egg on fire?"

"It would make sense wouldn't it? After all I took the egg from a dragon, and when Hagrid had that dragon egg in first year he kept it over a fire until it hatched."

"Hagrid had a dragon egg?! You never told me that story, Potter." Daphne said, laughing.

"I guess I forgot. He had to give the dragon up, though. Ron's brother works on a dragon preserve and he was able to come and take it there. Anyway, let me try this." Harry started by dispelling the silencing charm and as soon as he did the awful sound returned. He wasted no time in casting Incendio on the egg, but nothing happened. Realizing that the dragon egg was only kept over the fire before it hatched Harry grabbed the golden egg off of the desk and closed it. He then took a few steps back and recast the spell, but still nothing happened. Sighing in disappointment, Harry sat down and stared at the egg angrily.

"It was a good idea, even if it didn't work out." Daphne said, sitting down at a desk near his.

"Thanks. Maybe I'll just have to wait on you having another brilliant idea. I really owe you for last time."

"Don't mention it." she answered with a shrug.

"No, I mean it. If there is anything I could do to thank you just let me know."

"Anything, huh?"

"Well... within reason, yes."

"There is one thing, but I'm not sure you would want to do it."

"What?" Harry asked, very interested in what he could do to help her.

"Teach me how to cast the Patronus charm. You said you can cast a corporeal Patronus, right? I want to learn it, too."

"Sure, but why?"

"My father mentioned that it was important I learn it for some reason, and you are the only person I know here that can cast one other than the teachers. Come on Potter, let's see that Patronus."

"Fine." Harry took out his wand and started thinking about which memory to use. Remembering how he felt the previous year when Sirius said he would like it if he would come live with him, Harry jabbed out his wand and yelled "Expecto Patronum!" Immediately a pale, white stag leapt from Harry's wand and began to walk around the room as if it was looking for danger. Seeing none, it turned back towards Harry and approached him. Harry noticed Daphne staring and motioned her over. "You can get closer, he isn't going to hurt you." Daphne walked towards the ghost-like stag and attempted to pet him but was disappointed when her hand went straight through.

"This is amazing, it looks so real." Daphne whispered in awe, and then turned towards Harry and demanded: "Now you've got to show me how to do it." Harry nodded and ended the spell, causing the stag to turn into mist and then dissipate.

"It took me months to learn last year when Professor Lupin taught it to me. But I think that is because the way he does it and the way I do it are a little different."

"What do you mean?" she asked curiously.

"Well, I've played around with this spell a little bit this year and I think I've figured out how it works. Professor Lupin told me to focus on a powerful, happy memory when I cast the spell but the more I think about it the more I realize it isn't the memory that is important. It is the emotion. If you could make yourself feel happy without thinking of a memory then that would work just fine, but you really have to feel the emotion for it to work."

"I think that makes sense. So I need to come up with a memory or some other way to provoke a feeling of happiness?"

"Sure, but any other positive emotion would work too. Once you've cast the spell if you lose focus on that feeling then the patronus will fade away. I have an idea about why it happens, but I don't think I really have any way to see if I'm right."

"Tell me what you think."

"My guess is that when you cast the spell you use your magic to create the white mist that can either form a shield or a true Patronus. But the mist disappears if you don't have focus on a good emotion, so the spell can't work unless you can get both parts to work together. Does that make sense?"

"That's brilliant, Potter! What you're saying is that while magic creates the mist it is the emotion that maintains and shapes it, right?" At her simplified explanation Harry's face lit up.

"Exactly. I wasn't sure how to explain it, but that is what I was trying to say." Harry replied happily. "So, do you think you are ready to try it? The wand motion doesn't really matter, and the incantation is 'Expecto Patronum'."

"I'll try, but I doubt it will work. I'm having trouble coming up with a good enough memory to trigger the emotion."

"The hardest part is getting it to work the first time. After that you don't have to doubt whether or not you can do it because you know you already have. Try it anyway."

"Here goes nothing..." Daphne responded. Harry watched as she let her arm fall to her side and she closed her eyes in concentration. For a few minutes she stood very still, trying to recreate a happy feeling. Suddenly her eyes popped open and she raised her wand calling out the incantation. The white mist leapt from her wand and she struggled while trying to hold it together. After a few seconds the mist evaporated and she lowered her wand with a disappointed look on her face.

"That was great!" Harry called out, surprising her. "I'm serious, that was much better than my first try. I could barely get any mist at all. You just need to improve your focus on the emotion and then you'll have it."

"I hope so." she said thoughtfully. "Potter, why is your Patronus a deer?"

"My dad was an animagus, and that was his form. It's nice to have something that connects us, you know? Even if it is something little like that." Daphne nodded in silent understanding. "We'll find out what your Patronus is soon, too." he added to brighten the mood.

"I wonder what it will be." she said, considering the possibilities. Realizing there was no way of knowing until she was able to cast the spell correctly, she sighed and gave up. "Thanks for the lesson. I guess I better go, but we can keep working on this right?"

"Sure. Just be sure to think about a good memory, one with strong emotions attached to it. Good night, Greengrass." Daphne smiled at him and walked out of the room, leaving him to continue his training. Harry felt a little sad to see her go, but was soon turning his focus back to the spells he had planned on reviewing.

A few days later Professor McGonagall scheduled a meeting to make an announcement to all of the Gryffindors. Similar announcements were being made by the heads of the other three houses. During lunch almost the entire school had been busy discussing what the announcement could possibly be, but no one had yet been able to forward an idea that convinced the others. To Harry, the excitement over the announcement was a welcome change. It had been almost a week since the article in the Daily Prophet calling him either insane or a dark wizard had come out and since then he had received distrustful looks from almost all of the student body. Harry tried to ignore it, and this time it was easier than when he had received similar treatment two years ago after rumors that he was the heir of Slytherin had spread. At first he had been angry at their reactions, but that anger quickly dulled to annoyance and then to indifference. After all, did he not have friends that would stick by him? True, there were

not many of them but that did not really matter. And so Harry went on with his life, trying to do the best he could in school training his hardest so that he could survive the year. He just hoped McGonagall's announcement wasn't more bad news for him.

"Harry! Over here, we saved you a seat." Harry heard a voice call out as he entered the room. He looked over and realized that the voice belonged to Neville who was waving him towards an empty seat between him and Hermione. It was a good thing they had saved him a seat, he realized, because every other one was already taken even though the meeting was not supposed to start for another ten minutes.

"Thanks guys." Harry said while taking his seat. Looking around the room he spotted Ron talking with Seamus and Dean, looking somewhat bored. The other two male, fourth year, Gryffindors were nice enough but Harry had never really gotten to know them well. They seemed to share Ron's love of Quidditch but were definitely not fans of the Cannons, Ron's favorite team. Truthfully, Harry enjoyed playing Quidditch and even talking about strategy with his teammates but he always found long conversations about professional Quidditch annoying. 'Maybe Ron is better off with them as friends.' he considered.

"Harry, I was wondering if I could help you prepare for the next task." Hermione said, drawing his attention away from Ron. "I should have been there with you before the first task, but I was hoping I could start to make up for that."

"Sure Hermione. As soon as we figure out what the clue is I am sure your help would be great."

"Oh, so you and Neville are already working on the getting the clue?" Hermione asked, noting that Harry had said 'as soon as we figure out...'

"Harry hasn't asked for my help yet, Hermione. I would like to help too, if you think I could." Neville added.

"Of course, Neville. I really appreciated all you did helping me prepare last time." Harry said sincerely.

"Right, and then you went and did something completely different!" Neville laughed. "That was a great idea though, who would have thought to use parseltongue to speak to a dragon?"

"Wait, if you aren't working with Neville who are you working with?" Hermione questioned. Harry knew he must have let something slip, but clearly she still had no idea he was working with Daphne. It was too late to deny he was getting help from someone else, so he decided the best idea was to stall.

"I'll tell you Hermione, I promise. But not today."

"Ok, Harry. I am going to hold you to that promise." Hermione responded, clearly unhappy with Harry's answer. Harry wished he could have just told her about Daphne, but he was not willing to do that until Daphne said it was ok. If word got out that they were friends there would be consequences, and they would be worse for her than for him. Harry hated that, and wanted nothing more than to be able to protect her.

"Attention! Attention, everyone!" Professor McGonagall called from the front of the room. The assembled students immediately quieted and turned to listen to their Head of House. "I am pleased to announce that Hogwarts will host an event traditionally associated with the Triwizard Tournament, the Yule Ball." At this several voices, almost all female, began whispering with excitement and anticipation. "Students from fourth year and up are welcome to attend, while other activities will be scheduled for third years and younger. Further information will be posted on the bulletin boards in the common room. This event is first and foremost a ball, which means that there will be dancing." Several groans were heard in response to this.

"I think it would be better for everyone if I avoided the dance floor," Harry told Hermione with a laugh "Everyone's feet will be safer that way." Unfortunately for Harry, that was not going to be possible. For the next few minutes McGonagall continued to talk to them about the ball and everything that would accompany it. Even Harry had to admit it sounded like a fun time.

"Mr Potter, could you stay after?" Professor McGonagall asked as the rest of the students were dismissed. Harry sighed, guessing that he was not going to like what was to come. Once everyone else had left Harry walked to the front of the room where McGonagall was waiting. "It has long been a tradition for the Triwizard champions and their dates to open the ball with the ceremonial first dance. You will be expected to do the same."

"First dance? Date?" Harry said, trying to take in what he had heard. Professor McGonagall merely chuckled at his predicament.

"Mr Potter, despite what the Daily Prophet has been writing about you I doubt you will have any problem finding a girl willing to be your date for the evening. Do try and learn to dance well enough not to embarrass yourself."

"Yes, Professor. I'll try." Harry answered, wondering what he was going to do about the ball. Harry turned and walked out of the room to find Neville and Hermione waiting for him. They were both curious as to what Professor McGonagall wanted, but Neville was able to conceal his interest much better than Hermione.

"So, what did she say?" his bushy haired friend asked.

"Apparently the champions have to dance at the beginning of the ball with our dates. Meaning I not only need to learn to dance but I have to find someone willing to go to the ball with an insane dark lord." His friends laughed at his predicament, resulting in angry glares for both of them.

"Cheer up, Harry. You've faced a dragon, you can face this." Neville said encouragingly.

"And are you really saying that there is no one you want to ask?" Hermione questioned. Immediately the image of Daphne's face flashed in his mind, but he wasn't sure asking her to the ball would be a good idea. While he thought about it Hermione grinned knowingly. "So there is someone. You should ask them Harry, the worst that could happen is they say no." Harry nodded in agreement with her statement, still not sure if he would do it or not.

"I'll think about it, Hermione." Harry promised. To his surprise, for the rest of the day he found there was little else he could get his mind to focus on other than that.

The following evening found Harry once again in the third floor classroom trying to force as much power as he could into the spells he already knew. He enjoyed the exercise and the distraction it provided. As he cast spell after spell he could feel the slow drain on his energy begin to make itself felt. From experience he knew that if he kept going at this pace he would reach the end of his magical reserves in about a half hour. The sound from his spells impacting their targets was so loud he did not even notice the door opening or his Slytherin friend coming in.

"Potter!" she yelled, finally getting his attention. Harry slowly lowered his wand, the tip of which was still lightly smoking.

"Hey, Greengrass." he answered, still breathing heavy from training.

"I thought you said you weren't going to exhaust yourself anymore until we could figure out what was going on?" she reminded him.

"I know, but I'm not there yet. I could keep going for another thirty minutes." Harry sat down on bench, still huffing, and conjured a towel to wipe the sweat off of his face.

"Really? You could have fooled me."

"Yes ma'am, I've learned my lesson. I'll take it easy for the rest of the night." he answered sarcastically.

"Good. I'll only need you teaching skills tonight anyway. I think I have a got a good enough memory to make the Patronus charm work."

"Really? That's excellent!" Harry said in encouragement.

"I remembered that you said the emotion was more important than the memory, knowing that helped a lot. And I've been practicing since last time. I've gotten close, but I think I can get it this time. I'm going

to try it now..." Daphne took her wand out and began to concentrate on her memory. When Harry saw a small smile on her face he knew that she was going to be able to cast the spell successfully. Finally she raised her wand and yelled "Expecto Patronum!" Immediately pale white mist began to flow out of the tip of her wand. The mist did not dissipate, but instead seemed to form a sphere that grew as the spell continued for several minutes. The sphere then began to take a shape and the first thing Harry noticed was that her Patronus was going to be a four legged animal of some type. Slowly the shape became more and more defined until at last a small white fox was left, its head looking around the room for signs of danger. Harry smiled and glanced over to Daphne, who still had her eyes closed focusing on the spell.

"You did it! Open your eyes and take a look." Harry said with a grin on his face. Daphne's eyes shot open and landed on her Patronus which was now looking directly at her. Daphne's pride and happiness were clear in the way she looked at the proof of her accomplishment. The ghostly fox walked over to Daphne who began to inspect the Patronus.

"This is amazing. I wasn't sure I could do it..." Daphne softly whispered. The fox remained for another minute or so until the spell began to get harder for Daphne to maintain. Slowly the fox lost its form and turned to mist. Harry felt immensely happy for her, knowing how hard it was for him to learn.

"I knew you could do it." Harry answered.

"Thank you." she replied, still a little shocked that it worked. The spell must have taken a lot out of her, Harry realized, when he saw her stumble slightly. He rushed over to her and put an arm around her waist to hold her up. The expression on his face changed to one of concern.

"Are you feeling ok?" Harry asked.

"Just a little tired, I guess." she answered, but her head started to fall and gently landed on Harry's shoulder. Harry helped her over to a bench along one of the walls, still clutching her tightly. Reluctantly he

loosened his hold of her, but Daphne's head remained on his shoulder.

"Didn't you come in warning me not to exhaust myself?" Harry asked with a smile.

"Shut up, Potter." she said quietly. As the strength started to return to her she began to realize the position they were in. She sighed and lifted her head up and leaned against the wall for support instead. She was sad to note that it was much harder and colder.

"Do we need to get you to the infirmary for some Pepper Up Potion?" Harry asked, seriously this time.

"I don't think so. Just give me a minute. How are you able to make it look so easy?"

"I'm sure it will be easier the next time you do it. It's a hard spell, though." he reassured her. She nodded closed her eyes again, still not feeling strong enough to do much else. Harry watched her, wondering if she was about fall asleep. But a few minutes later she opened her eyes again stretched.

"I'm feeling much better now. Hope I didn't scare you too much." Harry laughed and shook his head, glad that she was ok.

"Greengrass, I was wondering. Would you like to go to the Yule Ball with me?" Harry asked, surprising even himself with the question. It had been on his mind all day of course, but he had not had any intention of asking her when she came into the room. Daphne's head swiftly turned in his direction, and Harry was quite happy to see a small smile on her face. But as quickly as it had appeared the smile faded and was replaced by a look of worry. He knew bad news was coming when she turned her head away and looked at the floor.

"I can't." she answered simply.

"Oh." Daphne looked back at Harry and could see the disappointment clearly on his face. She wished it didn't have to be this way, angry that they could not even say hello to each other in the halls without it

being looked at suspiciously. In that moment, Daphne made a decision.

"What I meant was, I can't answer you right now. There's something I have to do first. Can you wait a couple of days?"

"Did you already say yes to someone else?" Harry asked. The disappointment had faded from him, but was replaced with confusion and a little bit of hope.

"What? No, it's nothing like that! I'll explain as much as I can in a couple of days, ok? Please just leave it at that for now."

"Ok, I won't ask anything else right now."

"Good. Could you help me up? It looks like I have things to do." she stated. Harry stood and helped Daphne to her feet. She took a few steps to make sure she was ok to leave and found she was. "Thank you, Potter. For everything. I'll talk to you soon, ok?" Harry nodded and she walked out of the door, leaving Harry to speculate as to what was going on. He sighed with a little bit of frustration, realizing he would just have to wait to find out.

Author's Note:

I wish this update could have come a little quicker, but it happens. I hope you guys are enjoying this and remember your reviews and comments are always welcome. Now, I'll leave you to guess what Daphne is doing...

The next day Harry tried desperately to keep his mind focused on other things, but it kept coming back to Daphne. He thought often about their conversation the previous night and found it more and more confusing every time he mentally replayed it. The only comforting fact he had found was that Daphne seemed to want to go to the Yule Ball with him, even if other things might make that impossible. Harry wanted nothing more than to find her and get her to explain what was going on, but he had promised to let her handle the situation alone. Doing nothing was not a thing that came easy to him, he would much rather be rushing into action and facing whatever came his way head on. He laughed, knowing that if Daphne could hear what he was thinking she would mock him for being too much of a Gryffindor.

After dinner Harry had decided to read for a while instead of going to the third floor room to train. Earlier in the year he might have thought time spent reading would not help him face whatever challenged lay ahead, but he had eventually realized how stupid that idea was. Lots of types of knowledge can be useful, not just knowledge of spells. And so he was lying down on a long sofa in front of the fireplace with a beginner's book on Ancient Runes on his chest. The subject was more complicated than he expected it to be, but clearly could be very useful. He mentally chided himself for deciding to take Divination, which as far as he could tell was absolutely useless, instead.

Harry had made it through the day without giving in to his urges telling him to take action, but he hadn't noticed that his efforts had taken a toll on his attitude during the day or that his friends had noticed. Hermione in particular could tell that something was bothering him, and so after seeing him in the common room had decided to ask him about it. Harry did not notice that she was even in the room until she sat down on the sofa near his feet. He looked over the top of the book to see who had distracted him and after finding that it was Hermione he set his book down on his lap.

"Since when are you interested in Ancient Runes, Harry?" she asked, noticing the book he had been reading.

"I was just curious about what I was missing. Is it too late to drop Divination for something else?"

"No, but if you started next year you would probably have to be in the class with the third years. I could help you study if you wanted to try and catch up with our year, but it wouldn't be easy."

"Hmm, I'll have to think about it. Divination is a complete waste of time. I am sure Trelawny will miss being able to predict my death every class though." Harry added with a laugh.

"If you are going to do it, you need to decide soon. We only have a year and a half before our OWLs! I've barely even started on my study schedules for the next year, at this rate I will never be ready on time." she said, obviously worried. Harry laughed at his friend, knowing that she would probably end up with O's (the highest score) on every exam she took. Hermione frowned at his laughter, knowing that he did not take her concerns seriously.

"Relax, Hermione. You have plenty of time." Harry said, trying to talk his friend down from her self induced panic. "There's no need to worry about it yet."

"Fine, let's talk about other things then." Hermione answered, seeing her chance to turn the conversation towards what she originally wanted to know. "What's going on with you? You've been in bad mood all day."

"Have I?" Harry asked, surprised he had been that obvious. "Let's just say I have a lot going on right now. Tournaments, dates, golden eggs, dancing, figuring out who put my name in that damn cup, training, being slandered in the press... What else? I am sure I am forgetting something."

"Probably, but most of that was going on yesterday and you were fine then. So what is it?" Hermione looked at him, waiting for a response that wasn't coming. Deciding she would have to figure it out on her own, she started thinking about what possibly could have happened. Then an idea struck her. "Oh! Did you ask someone out and get turned down? It was Cho Chang wasn't it?"

"What? No, I did not get turned down and I did not ask Cho Chang." Harry answered, noting that technically it was true. Daphne may say no, but she had not yet. "Why would you think I would ask out Cho Chang anyway? I don't think I've ever even talked to her besides saying hello a few times."

"Oh, well I heard you and Ron talking about her a few months ago. And she is quite pretty."

"I'm not denying that, but I think I would rather go with someone I knew."

"I see, then we are talking about a girl you know fairly well. Since you obviously haven't asked me, we can take my name off the list of girls who could have turned down Harry Potter."

"I thought I told you, I didn't get turned down!" Harry said forcefully to Hermione's amusement.

"So who else do you know that it could have been? Ginny perhaps?" Harry looked at her in confusion.

"I think Neville is going to ask her to the Yule Ball. Don't tell him I told you that, though. Good for him."

"Not Ginny then. How about... Parvati Patil? Lavender Brown?"

"No and no. Give it up, Hermione. You are completely on the wrong track here. You are just going to have to wait and see who I am going to take." he added, aware that even he didn't know who he would wind up going to the Yule Ball with. Unhappy with the way the conversation was turning out, Harry decided to turn the tables on Hermione. "And what about you? What are your plans for the Ball?" Hermione smiled and blushed, then turned to look away.

"I've already got a date, and I am not going to tell you who it is." she answered. Harry grinned at her response, knowing that he could use it against her now.

"Well then, I guess we will both have to wait and see." Harry said triumphantly. Hermione realized she wasn't going to win this battle and sighed.

"Ok. In that case I am going to sleep. I still have my notes from third year Ancient Runes, if you're interested."

"Thanks Hermione, I would appreciate it. And good night." She nodded and began walking up the stairs towards her room. Harry was a little surprised at how close her guess about his situation had been, but was satisfied he had not said anything that would endanger his or Daphne's privacy. 'She is going to figure it out if I'm not careful...' he thought with a small sigh.

Harry did not see Daphne at all during the next day. She was absent even at meals, when she was normally seated near Tracy Davis and Blaise Zabini. This also happened to be the one day of the week in which Gryffindors did not share a single class with the Slytherins. Normally this was a relief and cause for celebration, but today Harry found it annoying. Even so he was careful not to let it show in his attitude; the last thing he wanted was to encourage Hermione to dig for more information. It was not until the following day that Harry once again felt a hand slip into his pocket and leave something behind. This time he simply smiled, not even turning to act like he didn't know who had done it. The note told him to meet Daphne in the third floor classroom at 8:30 PM and nothing else. Harry was reminded of the spy movies that Dudley sometimes liked to watch and thought it was funny that even with the advantage of magic he and Daphne were sending messages in the same way he had seen those fictional spies communicate.

By 8:15 Harry had grown tired of waiting and decided to get to the unused room a little early. He was a little disappointed to find that Daphne wasn't there, and so he sat down and began to wait. At exactly 8:30, the door opened and Daphne walked in. After stopping to magically lock the door and silence the room she turned towards him and smiled.

"Hello, Potter. Been waiting long?" she asked cheerfully, knowing that Harry was waiting on her answer.

"No, not long." Harry paused and decided he had waited long enough.
"So... what's going on?"

"We have a lot to talk about tonight, Potter. You have no idea how much trouble you caused when you asked me to the Yule Ball. Actually, that's not fair. I caused much of it as well when I decided that I wanted to go with you."

"Would it have been better if I had not asked you?" Harry said, frowning and waiting for her to turn him down.

"It would have been easier, I suppose. But you can't back out now. You asked, I am saying yes, and we are going. That's that." she said, grinning at his reaction. For a moment Harry just smiled but then, feeling a little of that Gryffindor courage, he stepped towards Daphne and pulled her into a hug. Harry expected her to be surprised by the hug, but she merely returned it.

"I was hoping you would say that." Harry admitted, still not breaking the contact. "There is one thing I may have forgotten to tell you though. Since I'm one of the Triwizard Champions we will have to open the ball with a ceremonial first dance, along with the other champions of course."

"That shouldn't be a problem, assuming you know how to dance. You do know how to dance, don't you?" Daphne pulled back so she could look at his face, which quickly dropped. "I will take that as a no. I guess we'll just have to add that to your training regimen. Now, let's sit and I will tell you what I couldn't say a few days ago." They both walked over to a long table with a couple of chairs surrounding it. Daphne took a seat near the end of the table and Harry took one directly across from her. For a few moments she sat thinking, deciding how to best explain.

"Just start from the beginning." Harry advised.

"Ok then. What do you know about the Greengrass family?" she asked.

"Not much. You parents are still alive and they weren't Death Eaters. You have a little sister who is a second year, in Slytherin like you. The family is pureblooded and considered dark as far as I know. Is that about right?"

"Very basic, but pretty much right. I guess you get the long version then. So let's start at the beginning. The Greengrasses are a relatively old family, though not as old as the Potters. The first mention of a Greengrass in the records is of a Henry Greengrass who received special recognition during the Goblin Rebellion of 1476. Whether he was a half-blood or a muggleborn is still being debated in my family."

"What? I thought your family was pureblooded?" Harry asked in shock.

"They are now, but how do you think every pureblooded family gets started? Somewhere at the very top of every family tree is a muggleborn wizard. That's part of the pureblood hypocrisy that they try to ignore. But we go along with it because in this society it is better to be a part of an influential family. Even the idiots like the Malfoy's know that the originator of their line was a mudblood." Daphne said, laughing.

"I guess I had just never thought about it, but that makes sense. You said my family was older, how do you know about them?"

"Because every 'proper' pureblood is taught the histories of the other families so you will know where you stand in terms of age and respect. The Potters are only about fifty years older, but they are also the last surviving official branch of the Peverell's and they can be traced to the very beginnings of wizarding Britain. They were also known to claim some relationship to Godric Gryffindor, but that isn't proven. Either way, if you wanted to play the part of a snobbish pureblood you have a good enough name to get away with it."

"But I'm a half blood."

"That wouldn't matter. The name is the important thing. Now, as I was saying before you distracted me, for the next few hundred years the

Greengrasses built up a reputation of being a relatively dark family. Sometimes allying with dark lords, mostly staying neutral, and in a few rare cases opposing them."

"You make it sound like there is always a dark lord around."

"That isn't far from the truth, actually. Normally a minor dark lord will rise up every twenty years or so and stick around for a couple of years before finally being defeated. Major dark lords are rarer, they usually only come about once every 200 years but when they do they could stay in control for decades. This century has been an exception to the rule with two major dark lords coming to power."

"Grindelwald and then Voldemort." Harry answered.

"Exactly. On the bright side they managed to kill off any competing minor dark lords, but does not help everyone else out much. The Greengrasses are considered a dark family, although not nearly as dark as the Malfoy's or the Nott's or the Black's."

"My godfather's family?" Harry asked, and then after thinking about it began to nod.

"Yes. Don't forget that his brother was a Death Eater, so was his cousin Bellatrix, and his other cousin might as well be after ending up married to a Malfoy."

"I'll have to remember to ask Sirius what he thinks about that." Harry said with a laugh.

"Opinions on my family changed a little bit fifty years ago when my grandfather, Darius Greengrass, joined the fight against Grindelwald." Daphne said, trying to get back on topic.

"Why?"

"That war was different than the one against You-Know-Who, even if some of their propaganda is similar. It might surprise you to find out how many of the darker families fought against Grindelwald, and how many others stayed neutral. The reason is that a lot of the families

saw Grindelwald as a foreigner looking to impose his will on wizarding Britain and they didn't like that, especially since his plans would cost them wealth and political power. The difference in the last two wars is like the difference between a nation being attacked by another nation and one fighting itself in a civil war. So, thinking it was in the family's best interest, he joined the war against Grindelwald. Apparently, this is when he started to really not like Dumbledore."

"But Dumbledore is the one who defeated Grindelwald, why wouldn't your grandfather like him if they were on the same side?"

"Because Dumbledore just wanted to defend and never wanted to attack. He sat back and did nothing as Grindelwald's forces killed almost fifty percent of the witches and wizards in Moscow, including some of my grandfather's friends. The history books say that Dumbledore was doing all he could, but apparently that was something my grandfather could never accept. By the time Dumbledore finally was willing to face and defeat Grindelwald most of the wizarding communities in Europe had been destroyed along with the muggle cities. A lot of the other families felt the way my grandfather did once the war was over."

"It is a shame they don't teach this in History, I would actually stay awake for that." Harry said, still very interested in where her story was headed.

"Maybe if we could get a living teacher that would be possible." Daphne complained, referring to the ghost that taught their Wizarding History class. "Back to the story... After the war grandfather went home and things started to go back to normal. Wizarding Britain had not been damaged as much as their continental counterparts, and so while other societies rebuilt ours began to thrive. The Greengrasses, along with many other families, prospered in terms of status and wealth. It wasn't until the late 1960's that rumblings about a new and powerful dark lord began. When You-Know-Who eventually declared his presence in the early 1970's my grandfather decided to keep the family neutral. Besides being the family's traditional stance, he was reluctant to ever join forces with Dumbledore again. Slowly, the Dark Lord's power was growing and by the late 1970's many people were beginning to think that he could not be stopped. More than once our

family was approached by Death Eaters who wanted the Greengrasses to pledge their loyalty to You-Know-Who, but my grandfather was stubborn and told them no every time. He was also approached by Dumbledore who wished for his assistance, but he was also told no."

"It sounds like your family should be called gray, not dark."

"Perhaps so, but we aren't done yet. My grandfather had two children, both sons. The oldest, my father, is Daniel Greengrass. As oldest he was expected to take charge of the family when grandfather died. His younger brother, Gabriel, wasn't very happy about that and they never really got along with each other. When the Dark Lord started winning my uncle begged grandfather to pledge the family to You-Know-Who, saying that the family would be better off if they did. Still though, the family stayed neutral. Then in 1978 my grandfather unexpectedly became very ill. The healers were never able to determine what was wrong with him, and after a few months he was dead. I wasn't born yet, so I never even had the chance to meet him."

"I'm sorry. I guess I know how you feel, I didn't get to know my grandparents either." Harry said, trying to comfort her.

"Thanks. A few days after my grandfather's death my uncle showed up at my father's home. He had joined the Dark Lord and taken the Dark Mark, and he urged my father to do the same for the 'good of the family'. My father, wanting to respect the wishes of his father, said no and made it clear that the family was staying neutral. Uncle Gabriel didn't like that, but decided not to challenge his decision. Every few months my Death Eater uncle would come home, ask my family if they were ready to join the Dark Lord, get told no, and leave. We never knew what exactly Uncle Gabriel was doing for You-Know-Who, and my father didn't really want to ask. Things stayed that way until October of 1981 when you somehow managed to survive the killing curse and the Dark Lord was defeated." Daphne stopped to catch her breath for a second and think of how to continue the story.

"What happened to your uncle?"

"A few days later he led a group of Death Eaters into the Ministry trying to get information on what happened to the Dark Lord and if he was still alive. The raid was not successful and of the five Death Eaters that came only my uncle survived the Auror's counter attack. He was then questioned, tried, and taken to Azkaban where he still lives to this day. My father went to see him a couple of times right after the trial, but Uncle Gabriel was bitter and angry and spent the visits blaming my father for not supporting the Dark Lord. So father stopped visiting. He hasn't been back in nine years."

"Wow, that is one hell of a story. But I still don't understand what it has to do with me asking you to the Yule Ball."

"I know, I'm getting there. One more thing about my uncle, want to guess who the Auror who captured him was?"

"It was Professor Moody wasn't it?"

"Yes it was. It's strange, when I first went to his class I expected him to treat me differently because of what happened. So far he has been nice to me, but he does seem to dislike some of the other Slytherins like Malfoy."

"Maybe he just doesn't blame you for your uncles actions, it wouldn't make sense to." Harry suggested.

"I guess so. Anyhow, after my uncle's arrest everyone just assumed that the Greengrass family had secretly supported You-Know-Who during the war. Even though it wasn't true my family was once again considered a dark family. Everything I've said so far has been what I have learned from my father over the years. My father always treated it like it was just interesting family history, but that changed a few months ago." she added.

"What happened?"

"You should know better than anyone since you were there. It changed when Death Eaters attacked the Quidditch World Cup. After that my father seemed very nervous, like he expected the Dark Lord to reappear at any moment. A few days before school started he sat

my sister and I down and told us to pay special attention to what the children of the old Death Eaters were saying and doing, and if we heard anything that we thought was important to immediately owl him. I need to apologize to you for what happened next though."

"Huh?" Harry asked, confused.

"I promised you that I wouldn't repeat the things you told me to anyone, especially about what happened at the end of first and second year. But I thought my father needed to know, so I told him. He was a little mad that I didn't tell him sooner."

"Oh, it's ok. I understand why you did what you did."

"Good. Apparently my father never really believed that the Dark Lord was dead, after all there was never a body to prove it. When I told him about the spirit of You-Know-Who going after the Philosopher's Stone in first year he knew he had been right, but he didn't know why the Dark Lord had not died. Somehow, I think he figured it out when I told him about the Chamber of Secrets and Riddle's diary. He got really excited when he heard about that and started asking all kinds of questions about what it did. I asked him what he was thinking but he told me it was better that I didn't know. I did overhear him say 'Of course, he wouldn't have made just one though' while he was thinking about what I said to him."

"I don't get it, what does he know and how?"

"I think I might know the how part. Before my grandfather died my father worked for the Ministry as an Unspeakable, and all he would tell me about his old job is that he did research. Maybe he learned something then that would explain how the Dark Lord is keeping himself alive. My father quit his job once he took control of the family because he thought that if he worked for the Ministry people would assume that he supported their fight against You-Know-Who and it would be impossible to stay neutral. After I finished telling him the things I had heard from you he insisted that we be very careful because it was only a matter of time before the Dark Lord was reborn."

"He might be right." Harry answered uncertainly. "He hasn't been able to do it yet, but he has gotten very close at least twice in the past few years. It just doesn't seem like there is anything we can do about it. Maybe Dumbledore is doing something."

"He probably is, but even Dumbledore isn't all powerful. I asked my father what we would do if the Dark Lord returned and he said that we would never join him, but for now it was important to not obviously take a side. I expected him to say that we would stay out of it at any cost, but for some reason he is willing to fight the next time around. That was why he encouraged me to learn the Patronus charm." she explained.

"Of course! There is no reason to learn it other than to fight of Dementors and they joined Voldemort's side in the last war. He thinks Voldemort will come after your family, doesn't he?" Harry asked, now very concerned about her safety.

"Eventually yes, but for now there is not much we can do but prepare ourselves. When you asked me to the Yule Ball I really wanted to say yes, and the only reason I didn't is because of my father's warning not to take a side. The moment we show up to the Ball together everyone is going to assume that we have joined your side."

"This is crazy, you know that right? We aren't fighting a war right now and I don't have a side." Harry stated in frustration.

"But we will be, and you will. After you asked me to the Yule Ball I owled my father and told him about it. He owled back that he would think about it and I should wait for his response. Then today he told me that I could go to the Ball if I still wanted to, but he didn't really explain why he changed his mind. He did say, however, that we should not let anyone know we are going together and that I need to make sure that my sister Astoria and I will be safe after everyone finds out."

"Safe from the other Slytherins you mean." Harry said knowingly. Since they truly became friends before the first task Harry had worried often about what would happen to her if anyone in her house

found out but he had not even considered that her little sister could be threatened as well. "Whatever I can do to help, I will do it."

"I know, and thank you. Astoria should be fine, she has a good group of friends that will stick by her no matter what. I won't be the most popular girl in Slytherin, but then again I never was. Not everyone will be against me though, Tracy and Blaise will watch out for me when they can." Daphne stopped, seeing that Harry was obviously upset at her predicament. "Stop blaming yourself, this was my decision. There is only one thing I need from you right now."

"And what is that?"

"Make sure to get yourself some nice dress robes." she said, grinning. "After all, our picture is probably going to end up on the front page of the Daily Prophet and I can't have my date looking like a slob."

"I'll see what I can do." Harry said, smiling a little. He was still worried about her, but realized that at the moment there was very little he could do.

"Story time is over. I better go, I still have half of that Transfigurations left to do. I know I dumped a lot onto you tonight, but I really am glad we are going to the Yule Ball together." she said sincerely.

"Me too." Harry answered. As she turned to leave Harry thought about all of the things she had told him, surprised that asking a girl on date could become so complicated. 'Then again,' he thought, 'nothing I do is ever easy.' He let out a small laugh as the door closed, leaving him alone in the classroom. A few minutes later he decided that his mind was too distracted to do any meaningful training and left the room as well. He spent the rest of the night mostly worrying about Daphne and thinking up ways to get revenge on Malfoy if he ever found out the blond idiot had threatened her because of him.

Author's note:

In the reviews for the last chapter several of you noted that Rita Skeeter's article contained inaccurate information about Harry Potter.

I am certain that the editors of the Daily Prophet would be appalled by this revelation and they will quickly issue a correction.

This chapter was very background heavy, but I thought we were far enough in to the story to start explaining where Daphne is coming from. Plus it might get you guys to start thinking about things I plan on doing in the story later on. Hope you liked it and please keep reviewing with your comments, criticisms, and ideas.

The next week passed rather uneventfully for Harry, much to his relief. Even the Daily Prophet got bored running the same stories about him and switched to different topics. A few days after that the Prophet actually printed an article which talked about him in a positive light, a move that might have otherwise made him happy but at the moment just convinced him the people in charge of the newspaper had no idea what they were doing. As the end of the semester approached, Harry's fellow students had less time to gossip about him as they found themselves studying for exams. A few of them even seemed to forget that they were supposed to dislike Harry because he was a dark lord in progress and were friendly towards him again. The only negative part of this was that he realized people could change their minds about him as quickly as the Daily Prophet. While walking with Neville to class one day a group of Ravenclaws who had not spoken to him for over month greeted him as if nothing had happened, prompting Harry to later joke to Neville that he was a hero Monday through Thursday but a villain the rest of the week. All things considered, Harry thought it was the best week he had had since his name was pulled out of the Goblet of Fire.

The biggest disappointment of this time was his inability to figure out how to retrieve the clue to the second task from the golden egg. He had tried casting dozens of spells on the egg hoping to unlock its secrets but none of them had been successful. Daphne had contributed a few ideas but none of them had worked either. Eventually Harry realized that he was going to need more help and had told Neville and Hermione about his dilemma. This resulted in Hermione immediately rushing off to the library to begin looking for ideas. She was neglecting her school work in order to help him, and once Harry realized that he ordered her to stop pushing herself so hard. He knew she was working so hard in an attempt to make up for her previous mistakes and while he really did appreciate the effort, he didn't want to see his friend's grades suffer because of it. Hermione was able to come up with a few ideas he had not considered, but still nothing they tried worked. Harry had even considered asking Cedric if he knew what to do with the egg, thinking the older champion might feel like he owed Harry a little help for giving him some advice before the first task. He finally decided against asking for now, although he could always reconsider if time was running out and he still had not discovered the clue.

Meanwhile Harry's training had changed significantly. After realizing that Daphne would be putting herself in danger because of their relationship (which even he could see was quickly becoming more than a simple friendship) he began insisting that she practice alongside him. She initially protested, saying that she would just slow him down, but gave in to his demands when it became clear he was not going to back down. Harry's training did move slower, which was inevitable due to his greater experience and magical power, but he was happy to see that the extra time he spent on every lesson allowed him gain a better understanding of what he was doing. It was clear to him that Daphne had the potential to be a very powerful witch if she pushed herself, and Harry was dedicated to helping her do just that. To Harry's surprise it was Daphne that suggested they start dueling each other as a part of their training. Neither of them had ever had formal instruction on how to duel so for the most part they were dependent on various books on dueling and learning by the trial and error method. They were learning a lot, but Harry knew that they were going to eventually need someone more experienced to teach them. His first choices were either Sirius or Remus, but he didn't know if it would be possible for either of them to do it until the summer at the earliest. Daphne, he knew, would be able to practice with her father who would not need to be convinced why it was necessary.

The fact that they were secretly preparing for a war that he hoped never came to pass was often on his mind. Harry doubted he would ever be a powerful wizard in the same league as Voldemort or Dumbledore, but knew that for some strange reason that the only way Voldemort would stop trying to kill him was if he finally succeeded. And even then Riddle would probably curse his corpse a few times just for laughs. He guessed that the dark wizard's obsession with him was due to the fact that as long as he lived he was proof that Voldemort was not all powerful. Harry also wondered about the complaints regarding Dumbledore that Daphne's grandfather had. All of the history books agreed that Dumbledore had joined the war several years before he finally faced Grindelwald on the battlefield, but what exactly was he doing during that time? No one seemed to know why he waited, but it was clear that if Dumbledore was avoiding Grindelwald then Grindelwald was also doing his best to avoid Dumbledore. Decades later in the war against Voldemort it was

Dumbledore that was known as the only wizard that Voldemort feared, and yet the evil wizard was not brought down by the Headmaster but by an infant. Once again Harry felt that there was missing some key piece of information that would explain everything, but he was unable to determine what it was. He wondered what Dumbledore would say if he asked about it, but doubted that he would get a plain answer when no one else had been able to.

All of this combined to make Harry quite nervous. It was a hard thing for a fourteen year old to realize that his foreseeable future would be spent either trying to prevent a war or fighting in one, though he hoped that did not come to pass. Surely others were aware of what was happening, especially Dumbledore. But Dumbledore had done nothing to keep him out of the tournament after his name came out of the Goblet of Fire, which he could only assume was somehow related to Voldemort. In fact, the two had barely spoken to each other since then. Perhaps Harry should try and see the Professor...

For what seemed like the millionth time, Harry wished he could just have the problems that a normal teenager had.

Daphne yanked open the door to her bedroom in the Slytherin dorms wanting nothing more than to collapse on her bed and sleep for a few days. Ever since she had told Harry about her family history and the danger she might be in he had taken it upon himself to turn her into a one girl army. She had owed her father and told him about Harry's reaction to her story and he seemed proud of her and impressed with Harry's drive and initiative. She was somewhat surprised to find that she enjoyed their joint practices and that she was improving faster than she had ever expected. Despite her improvement, however, she was still no match for Harry who she was now convinced would have been the true Hogwarts Triwizard champion if they had allowed him to enter legitimately.

Her thoughts of sleep were suddenly disrupted when she noticed someone sitting on her bed. Daphne's wand was up and the tip glowing bright red with a spell ready to be cast when she realized that the person on her bed was not a threat at all, just her little sister Astoria. The light from her wand dimmed and she lowered it to her side, but she continued to glare at the younger witch.

"You know better than to surprise me like that, I almost hexed you." Daphne advised Astoria.

"You wouldn't hex your favorite sister would you, Daph?" Astoria answered, pretending to be perfectly innocent.

"Only sister, and maybe." Daphne responded. Astoria merely shrugged and continued to sit on the bed. Astoria looked much like a younger version of her older sister. Their face shapes were almost identical and they had similar builds, although even when they were both finished growing Daphne was destined to be a couple of inches taller than her younger sister. Some of their other features differed, such as Astoria's eyes were green while Daphne's were a dark blue and the younger Greengrass had brown hair as opposed to her sister's blond hair. Both girls were still considered quite beautiful by their peers. Daphne waited for Astoria to say something, but when a minute had passed and she hadn't Daphne sat down next to her sister and said "So, what's going on?"

"That's actually what I wanted to ask you, Daph." she said with a small smile. One other difference in the two girls was their personalities. Astoria was very talkative and outgoing and seemed to make a lot of friends, even ones from other houses who might have otherwise thought it strange to meet a Slytherin so likable. Daphne preferred to keep a few good friends and didn't really care what anyone else thought. Astoria could also be very blunt when she had something to say or ask.

"What exactly are you talking about?" Daphne asked.

"Oh a lot of things. Like where have you been disappearing to every night for the past few weeks?"

"I'm studying, Astoria. Perhaps you aren't familiar with doing that? Honestly, I hear you are scraping by with an Acceptable in Herbology." She tried her best not to look at all surprised or interested in Astoria's accusation, but mentally she was kicking herself for not being more careful.

"I'll bring the grade up by the end of the year, and quit trying to change the subject. I know you haven't been in the library."

"There are lots of places in the castle to study, it doesn't have to be done in the library you know."

"Ok, maybe so. I'll give you that one. But what about this?" Astoria motioned to the new dress that her mother had sent her to wear to the Yule Ball. Daphne had been in a rush to get to class when she had received the package and had simply left the dress on her bed. "I know this is a new dress, which could only be for the Yule Ball. But no one else seemed to think you were the least bit interested in going. So spill it, who is the lucky guy?"

"That's what this is about, you want to gossip about me?" Daphne asked incredulously.

"Well, that and at the end of his last letter to me dad wrote 'remember to listen to your sister, no matter what happens in the next few weeks'. Leading me to think something strange is going to happen in the next few weeks." Daphne sighed and shook her head, knowing that she was going to have to tell her sister something, even if she didn't want to explain everything.

"Ok Astoria, I'll tell you a little. Yes, that dress is for the Yule Ball."

"I bet mom and dad know who you are going with, don't they?" Astoria whined.

"Yes. And they approve, so you should stop worrying about that. I would tell you who I'm going with but I know how bad you are at keeping secrets." Daphne said aiming a mocking smile at her sister.

"I am not!" she responded angrily. "Fine, don't tell. Why should I care anyway?"

"You actually should." Daphne said with a sigh. "I have a feeling that after the Yule Ball our fellow Slytherins might not like me too much. I can take care of myself, but you have to let me know if anyone is

giving you a hard time because of me ok?" Astoria looked at her sister with a confused expression on her face. She couldn't think of any reason for Daphne to think that, but she did trust her older sister enough to give her the benefit of the doubt. Plus, whatever was going on, seemed to have worried her parents a little as well.

"Alright Daph. But after the Yule Ball you are going to tell me everything."

"Agreed. Now get out of here, I want to sleep." Daphne said as she stood and picked up her dress in order to hang it up. Astoria nodded and left the room, wishing she could help her older sister with whatever was troubling her. Once she was gone, Daphne frowned and looked at the closed door her sibling had just walked out of. She could only guess what her house's reaction to her date with Harry Potter was going to be, but she promised herself that if anyone laid a finger on Astoria they would pay for it in a variety of painful ways. And if necessary she could always ask Harry to help she thought with a evil grin, she knew he would be happy to do it.

On the last day of classes in the winter semester the student population was in a mild state of panic, as was completely normal. The last round of end of semester exams was today, and for the fourth year Gryffindors that meant Potions with Professor Snape. Harry had found over the years that his work had to be almost flawless in order to receive even a passing grade. The result, although Snape would never admit it, was that Harry had turned out to be quite a proficient potions brewer. Even so, he knew that Snape took special joy in criticizing his exams, so even though Harry felt confident he knew what he was doing going into the test he could never be sure what the result would be. Luck was on his side today as Vincent Crabbe had somehow managed to blow up his cauldron a quarter of the way through the test. Professor Snape was too distracted handling the aftermath to sabotage Harry's potion and as a result he had completed the potion as close to perfectly as he thought possible. It might even be good enough for an Exceeds Expectations grade from the greasy git of a professor.

With his exams done and feeling good about his day so far, Harry decided to take the golden egg down to a quiet spot by the lake and

give it another try. He was convinced that his original idea of casting Incendio on the egg had been a good one and thought that maybe he just needed to get the egg hotter. The thought of casting the fire spell at full power inside the castle made him nervous, he had no intention of becoming The-Boy-Who-Burned-Down-Hogwarts after all, so he decided that doing it outside was a much better option. He had found rocky section next to a side of the lake facing the Forbidden Forest and thought it was a perfect place for his experiment. As long as he set the egg on the rocks and cast towards the lake there was little chance that even the grass would catch fire. And, on the off chance it did, there would be a large body of water nearby he could use to put the fire out.

Five minutes after reaching his chosen spot Harry was finally satisfied that he had everything set up how he wanted it and was ready to begin. As he got into place and prepared to start the spell the sound of someone calling his name forced him to look up and towards the castle where he could see Hermione walking towards him. He lowered his wand and waited, remembering that he had told her what he planned on doing earlier in the day.

"Hey, Hermione." he said when she finally made it to his spot on the lake. "Come to watch the fireworks?"

"Of course! And it will be nice to warm myself by the flaming egg on a cold day like this." she added with a laugh.

"Let's get this started then. Why don't you stand over there, it'll be safer that way." Hermione nodded and moved to the spot he had pointed at. Harry raised his wand and concentrated on focusing his magic. Slowly he could feel the power bubbling to the surface, looking for a way to escape. Knowing he was ready, Harry flicked his wand in a precise movement and shouted "INCENDIO!" The huge flame that leapt out of his wand was hot enough that Hermione felt the need to take a few more steps backwards. The golden egg was not even visible, hidden by a stream of fire that showed no signs of letting up. After thirty seconds Hermione began to wonder how long Harry could keep casting a spell of this strength. A minute in she was shaking her head in disbelief that her friend was capable of such a feat. By the

time Harry ended the spell nearly three minutes after he started it Hermione was staring at him in awe.

"Harry Potter! Where did you learn that?!" Hermione finally managed to say, not nearly as loud as she had planned. Harry meanwhile was breathing heavily, waiting for the smoke around the egg to clear. When it finally did Harry saw that the egg was glowing red from the heat, but other than that there was absolutely no change.

"Damn it!" he yelled out in frustration. "I was so sure that would work." Harry was pacing in front of the egg, racking his mind trying to find something he might have missed.

"Harry, calm down. We'll figure this out, I know we will." Hermione reassured him, but Harry was still pacing. Hermione was about to say something else when Harry growled at the egg and kicked it into the lake where it promptly sank to the bottom with the water above beginning to heat and turn into steam as the egg cooled.

"Ok, I feel better now." Harry finally said as he walked over to where Hermione was still standing.

"Really?" Hermione asked in a sarcastic tone.

"Sure. At least now I know that the fire idea is a bust. I'll just have to try something else next time. There has to be something about the egg I am missing."

"Speaking of the egg, shouldn't you go get it before you forget where it is?"

"That shouldn't be a problem" Harry answered. He walked over to the shore of the lake and pointed his wand at the spot where the egg had dropped. "Accio golden egg!" he said forcefully, but nothing happened. Frowning, Harry tried the spell again and it still did not work. He was about to cast the spell a third time when he suddenly lowered his arm and started laughing.

"Harry, what's so funny?" Hermione asked, a look of confusion etched on her face.

"I was just thinking how stupid I would have felt if that had actually worked!"

"What are you talking about?"

"Of course the golden egg has anti-summoning charms on it!" Harry explained. "If it didn't I could have just walked up to the dragon, Accio'd the egg away, and left without ever having to face the dragon. And all of the trouble we went to figuring out how to get past the dragon would have seemed really silly." Hermione smiled, finally understanding what was so funny.

"So Hermione, I was thinking. I am sure I would forgive you of all past, present, and future sins if you would do me a small favor and get my egg out of the lake for me." Harry said, trying to look serious.

"Dive into the lake in the December? I don't think so, Harry. You kicked it, you go get it." Hermione answered, still smiling. Harry grumbled and then walked over to the edge of the lake, pausing to take his school robe and shoes off. He stopped and looked at the lake for a few moments, as if trying to convince himself to dive in, before looking back at Hermione.

"Just make sure to cast a drying charm and a warming charm on me as soon as I get out, ok?" Hermione nodded in agreement and Harry started to walk into the lake, shivering a little at the cold water. When he was in up to his waist he dove in and began swimming to where he had last seen the egg. The water in this part of the lake was very murky making it impossible for him to see very far, so Harry had to do most of his searching with his hands. After about a minute under water Harry had to come up for air. When he did he realized that he should be able to find the golden egg if he moved about ten feet further from the shore. Taking one last breath, Harry dove back under the water and swam to where he expected the egg to be. Finally, his hand hit something cold and metal. Grabbing the egg by the latch on its top, Harry bent down to kick off the lake bed when suddenly the egg shifted in his hands. As the latch turned and the sides dropped open Harry was shocked to hear not the ungodly shrieking he was used to but a pleasant sounding voice singing.

'This is it! It's the clue!' Harry realized before turning his attention back to the egg. He stayed at the bottom long enough for the egg to be repeated before finally rising to the surface. As soon as he was able to refill his lungs with air he looked towards Hermione and yelled "I did it, Hermione! I figured out what the clue is!" He quickly swam back over to the shore and ran to where Hermione was waiting to magically dry and warm him.

"Ok, now explain yourself." his friend demanded.

"You have to listen to the egg underwater, that's the only way to understand it. I never even thought about doing that, Hermione. I just got really lucky."

"So what does it say?" she asked.

Harry thought for a moment, making sure he remembered it correctly, and then began:

"Come seek us where our voices sound,
We cannot sing above the ground.
And while you're searching ponder this:
We've taken what you'll sorely miss,
An hour long you'll have to look,
And to recover what we took
But past an hour - the prospect's black
Too late, it's gone, it won't come back"

Hermione's face scrunched up in concentration, trying to determine the meaning behind the clue. "Harry, I think they are talking about the Merpeople in the lake." she said after a few moments thought.

"That's what I thought, too. So the Merpeople are going to take something from me and I will have an hour to look for it. Meaning we need to figure out how I am going to stay underwater for an hour and not die." Hermione nodded and walked over to a rock that was about as tall as her waist. Pulling herself up, she sat and the look of concentration came back to her. Harry, knowing that determined look, smiled and sat down next to her. "I guess I could always use scuba

gear, right Hermione?" Harry joked. Hermione turned and looked at him as if he had suddenly sprouted another head.

"Harry I am pretty sure the point of the tournament is to complete the tasks using magic. Although, perhaps if you were able to transfigure something into scuba gear..."

"I was joking, you know." Harry replied, to which Hermione merely shrugged. "The second task isn't until February 24, so we have over two months to figure this out. That's quite a bit better than last time, I'm sure by then we will be experts at underwater magic."

"Hopefully so. That reminds me, how were you able to cast that Incendio for so long? And how did you make the flames so big?" she asked, intrigued by her friend's abilities.

"It's just a matter of focus and putting all of the power you can into it. I think I may be a bit stronger in that category than average. It's not normal that a thirteen year old could not only cast the Patronus charm but to do it strong enough to drive off dozens of dementors, is it. Plus, I've been working on my magic a lot recently." he said casually, as if he had not been spending almost all of his free time working on it.

"Do you think I could practice with you, Harry?" she asked hopefully. Harry frowned a bit, not ready for Hermione to learn about his secret lessons with Daphne.

"Let's wait until after Christmas, if you're still interested then let me know." Harry finally said, deciding that it was a good enough solution to the problem because by then Hermione would have already seen Harry and Daphne together at the Yule Ball. Hermione nodded in agreement, looking forward to learning new things alongside Harry. Harry wondered how Hermione and Daphne would act around each other, once his big secret was out in the open. He hoped they would be friendly because he didn't want to have to choose between them if he didn't have to. If he did have to choose though, he asked himself, which one would he choose? At the beginning of the year it would have easily been Hermione, but things had changed. Harry was amazed that in a few short months someone could become so important to him, but it had happened. So much had changed, he

wondered where he would be if it weren't for Daphne's influence and friendship. 'Worse off' he decided.

"Let's go inside, Hermione. It's getting cold out here, but maybe I just feel that way because I jumped in the lake a few minutes ago." Hermione laughed at him, noting that he did indeed still look cold.

"Ok, but can I borrow your egg for a while? I would like to hear the clue for myself. Then maybe I should go down to the library and start looking up underwater charms, I think I know a good book to start with..."

"You can have the egg on one condition: take the night off. I promise you we will work on this soon. Why don't you go hang out with that mystery date of yours?" Harry asked with a grin. He had already begun to walk off when he said it so he could barely hear Hermione's annoyed response.

That night Harry excitedly told Daphne about how he had opened the egg and what the clue was. She agreed with his and Hermione's assessment that the Merpeople were going to hide something of his under the lake. Unfortunately, she also didn't know of a spell that could be used to breathe underwater. Daphne also told him of her sister's sudden interest in what she was doing with her time. Harry fully expected to be interrogated by the younger Greengrass when she did find out who Daphne's date was. Luckily, they both thought, no one else had any idea that they were going to the Yule Ball together. A few girls had asked Harry if he had a date yet, apparently him being a Triwizard champion was enough to make up for the fact that he was a future dark lord, but he had politely told every one that he already had a date.

And so the winter break began and the anticipation for the upcoming Ball grew. Most years the castle was nearly empty during the holidays, but this year almost everyone stayed so that they could attend the Yule Ball. At Daphne's request Harry had added ballroom dancing to their training. In the beginning he was absolutely dreadful at it, which Daphne discovered in the way of several stepped on toes. Daphne, who was expected to be able to dance due to pureblood customs, was slowly able to bring his performance up to an acceptable level.

Two days before the Yule Ball she finally deemed him ready, saying that he might not embarrass them both. Harry had been so busy that it wasn't until the day before the ball that the realization that he had never been on a date before and had no idea what to do really struck him. Part of him thought he was less nervous about facing the dragon, at least then he had a plan. He spent the rest of the night trying to calm himself down, and was mostly able to as he finally went to bed hoping that this Christmas would be one that he would happily remember.

Author's Note:

Just in case some of you got the wrong impression, I don't plan on bashing Dumbledore. I think he has good intentions, but the way he handles things leaves a lot to be desired. This may or may not become a bigger issue as the story progresses, you'll just have to wait and see. Next chapter we finally get to the Yule Ball, how will things change? You will find out soon.

Christmas morning Harry was suddenly woken up by a heavy weight falling on his chest. His arm immediately darted out to grasp his wand, which he had set on his bedside table. A moment after he had the wand pointed at the object laying on him his eyes began to focus and even without his glasses he was able to recognize the blurry shape.

"Dobby? What are you doing?" he asked, setting his wand down and reaching for his glasses. The little house elf was staring at him and bouncing up and down in excitement.

"Dobby wanted to be the first to tell you Merry Christmas, Harry Potter sir." Dobby squealed happily. "Dobby had to be early before someone else did it!" By now Harry's roommates were beginning to wake up at the commotion being caused by the happy elf. He could hear several groggy voices asking "What's that noise?" and "What time is it?"

"Sorry guys, it's just Dobby. Go back to sleep. It's not even six o'clock yet." Harry said. Neville nodded and went to lay back down, but the others didn't seem to think that was a good idea.

"No way." Seamus replied, "It's Christmas morning and I am going to open my presents." Harry sighed, guessing that he was just going to have to wake up. Dobby finally moved off his chest, allowing him to sit up and move to the foot of the bed where he could see his roommates already starting to open their presents. Harry went to reach for a box decorated with a bright red bow which he guessed was his annual sweater from Mrs Weasley when he was suddenly stopped.

"Mine first, Harry Potter sir." Dobby commanded, handing him a small bag covered in brightly colored ribbons. Harry slowly began to untie the ribbons and when he finally got it open pulled out two mismatched sox that appeared to have been hand knitted. "I made them all by myself!" Dobby commented proudly. Harry looked back at the socks, noting that not only were they different colors but different sizes as well.

"Thanks Dobby. These are really... great." Harry smiled at the elf who was now crying tears of joy, thrilled that Harry liked his gift. He felt a

little guilty that Dobby had gone to so much trouble and he had not even bothered to get a gift for him. Then, an idea struck him and he reached into his trunk and pulled out a single sock who had long ago lost its mate. "In fact, I got you something too. Merry Christmas, Dobby." Dobby pulled the sock out of Harry's hands and then threw himself at Harry, his little arms hugging as tightly as they could.

"Harry Potter is too kind! Dobby will treasure this forever, sir!" Harry noticed that the rest of his roommates were now looking at him and the elf trying to hold back laughter. Even Ron, who had done his best to avoid even looking at Harry, had a smile on his face.

"You're welcome, I'm just glad you liked it." Dobby thanked him again and then left the room, saying that he was needed back in the kitchens. Harry turned back to his presents and found that the box he had been looking at did indeed contain a sweater from Mrs Weasley. He felt relieved that she had not listened to the foolishness being printed in the Daily Prophet and wasn't holding the troubles between himself and Ron against him. Harry stopped opening presents and took a moment to watch his roommates, all happily opening presents from family and friends. Ron was opening a package that contained a sweater that looked much like the one he had received, while Neville was tearing open a present from him that contained a rare Herbology book he was able to owl order from the bookstore in Diagon Alley. Harry was enjoying the scene before him when he noticed Ron looking at him strangely.

"Harry?" his old friend asked, holding up a hat with the logo of Ron's favorite Quidditch team, the Chudley Cannons, on it. Harry had felt uncertain whether or not he wanted to get Ron anything, but eventually decided to. He still hoped that one day they could be friends again. Ron had not given him anything, but Harry wasn't expecting him to.

"Merry Christmas, Ron." he answered simply. Ron nodded his head while muttering a very quiet "Thanks" and set the present down in the pile containing the rest of his gifts. Fifteen minutes later all of the presents had been opened and his roommates were discussing whether or not to go back to sleep. Ron and Neville, who never really wanted to wake up in the first place, were already back in bed. Harry

got up and left Dean and Seamus to argue with each other about what to do next. He had the feeling that this was going to be a long and eventful day.

A few hours later Harry was enjoying breakfast in the Great Hall. The house elves always try to make meals on Christmas special, and this was no exception. The tables were stacked high with a huge variety of foods and treats. Harry was happily eating and chatting with Hermione and Neville, who had finally decided to get out of bed.

"Neither of you are being fair to me," Neville complained, "You both know that I am going with Ginny Weasley, but neither of you will tell me who you are going with." Neville dropped his fork and stared at his friends, waiting for one of them to finally reveal their secrets. "If I didn't know better I would think... that's it isn't it?! You two are going to the Yule Ball together. It makes sense now, but I don't understand why you would think you needed to hide it from everybody." Harry and Hermione both began laughing and shaking their heads at Neville's guess.

"That's not it at all." Harry answered. "I promise you that I am not taking Hermione to the Yule Ball. In fact she hasn't told me who she is going with either."

"Don't whine about me not telling you, I don't know who you are taking." Hermione retorted.

"I've said all along that you were both going to have to wait and see. I will tell you this though; you are going to be very surprised with who it is." Harry smiled at his friends' frustration. Hermione saw Harry's satisfaction with himself, and decided to get even.

"Gee, Neville, who do you think would be the most surprising person Harry could take to the Ball?" Hermione asked with a mischievous grin.

"Maybe he is taking Professor McGonagall." Neville answered, both of them trying their best not to even look at Harry while they continued their conversation.

"No, I can think of someone more surprising than that. Harry is taking Professor Snape to the Ball!" At this Hermione and Neville began laughing loudly while Harry watched angrily, but eventually even he had to admit it was funny and began to smile.

"A hundred points from Gryffindor for being prats!" Harry said in his best Snape impression. All three of them continued laughing, as well as the people sitting close enough to them to hear the conversation. After taunting Harry a few more times the topics returned to the normal Christmas ones such as what presents they had all gotten. Hermione once again thanked Harry for his gift: a fifty galleon gift certificate to Flourish & Blotts.

Hermione's thank-you's were interrupted when dozens of owls flew into the Great Hall. Almost everyone had received a letter from their families wishing them a Merry Christmas. Harry was surprised when an owl he didn't recognize landed on the table in front of him and held out its leg, waiting for Harry to pull the letter off. Curious about whom it could be from, Harry took the letter and gave the owl a piece of bacon in thanks. As the owl hooted and flew off Harry opened the letter, happily realizing that it was from Sirius.

"Merry Christmas Harry!

I wish I could be there with you, but until we find Wormtail I have to stay on the run.

On the bright side we are working on finding a place for you to stay for part of the

summer so you won't have to spend it all with those relatives of yours. It still makes

me angry to think that someone as wonderful as Lily could have a sister so dreadful.

Congratulations on getting past the Horntail! Perhaps not the method I would have

thought of but it certainly did work. Don't let those idiots who think your talents are

evil bother you, Harry. You are growing up to be a fine young man and I know your

parents would be proud of you. I know I am.

Good luck on the rest of the tournament. Remember to keep your eyes open and be

on guard at all times. If you think someone is acting suspicious let me know and we

can talk about it. You can now mail me if you want, but don't send Hedwig because

she is too easily recognizable. Take care of yourself, Harry.

Love, Sirius"

Harry read the letter a couple of times, pleased to hear that his Godfather was still safe. He wondered where Sirius was hiding this Christmas and hoped it was somewhere warm. Harry felt a bit of hope rising up inside him when he remembered that Sirius was working on finding him a place to stay at other than the Dursley's, that would be an excellent present. He had been silently thinking about the letter for a few minutes when he realized Hermione was looking at him curiously.

"The letter was from Si- Padfoot. He seems to be doing ok." Harry said. Hermione smiled, knowing how attached Harry was to his godfather.

"That's great Harry. What are you going to do for the rest of the day?"

"I think I'll go see Hagrid. Do you want to come?"

"No thanks." Hermione answered. "I've got some things to do and then I really do need to get ready for the Yule Ball." Harry was a little

bit confused, just how long did it take for a girl to get ready for something like this? He had just planned on putting his dress robes on and spending a few minutes trying to get his hair to lay down, which he already knew would not be successful. Harry shrugged and decided he didn't really want to know what went into a girl's preparations for a Ball. Taking one last drink of pumpkin juice, Harry said a few quick good-byes and walked out of the Great Hall.

Harry spent the next few hours with Hagrid, who was surprised but very happy that Harry wanted to spend Christmas day with him. As the hours passed Hagrid seemed to be getting more and more nervous. Harry asked why and Hagrid confided that he had a bit of a crush on Madam Maxine, the Beauxbatons Headmistress. Harry smiled at his large friend's secret and wished him good luck. Hagrid then proudly showed him his outfit for the Yule Ball, which included a ridiculous tie that he seemed to be quite proud of. Harry assured him that Madame Maxine would love it before leaving for lunch.

After lunch Harry ended up on the third floor in the classroom he had unofficially taken over. He couldn't will himself to be interested in what he was doing however, because his mind kept drifting off to thoughts about what the night would bring. After tonight he would finally be free to talk to Daphne in public, something so basic it angered him that they were not already able to do it. In many ways, everything would change tonight and not just for him but for Daphne's family as well. Harry had wanted to tell his friends who he was going to the Yule Ball with for a long time, but Daphne had persuaded him not to. She did this not just because it would make things easier on her but so that her family could have time to ensure that they would be protected (physically, politically, and financially) if someone decided to threaten them because of their actions. Harry was still astounded that all this trouble was going to be caused by him taking Daphne to the Yule Ball, an event that in any sane world would not be a problem at all. 'Then again,' he thought, 'my world hasn't ever been sane.'

Finally it got late enough for Harry to decide to go get ready. He had bought new dress robes, as Daphne had suggested, and thought he looked pretty good in them. Far better than Ron would look in those frilly old robes his mom sent him at least. For fifteen minutes he tried

to do something with his hair, but it was useless. His hair had a mind of its own and there was nothing Harry could do about that. 'Not even cutting it off would work' he thought, remember a time when he was younger and his aunt had tried just that. Finally satisfied that he wasn't going to be able to make himself look any better, Harry left the Gryffindor common room and headed towards the Yule Ball.

The four champions and their dates were supposed to meet in a room adjacent to the Great Hall ten minutes before the ball started. This was so they could go over last minute instructions on their roles and to answer any questions that they might have. Harry arrived a few minutes early to find that the only champion there was Cedric Diggory and his date, Cho Chang.

"Hi Cedric, Cho." Harry said as he walked towards them. The couple turned and smiled brightly at Harry, each giving him a small wave. Harry looked at Cho and noted that his earlier comment about her being pretty wasn't entirely accurate. She was, in fact, beautiful. He felt no jealousy towards Cedric because of this though, he was actually happy for them both. It was obvious that they liked each other quite a bit.

"Hey Harry. Where's your date?" Cedric asked, turning his head to look around the room.

"On her way. I offered to pick her up but she said she would meet me here. Something about 'making a grand entrance'." Cedric laughed in response, and then got a serious look on his face as if an idea had just struck him. He glanced around to make sure they could not be heard and then leaned towards Harry.

"I still owe you for helping me out on the first task, Harry. If you get stuck trying to figure out the clue you ought to consider taking a bath. In fact, use the prefect's bath. The password is 'pine fresh', just remember to take your egg with you." he said, still smiling at Harry. Harry grinned in response, having already figured out the clue.

"Come and seek us where our voices sound..." Harry replied. Cedric eyes shot open in surprise, recognizing the first line of the clue.

"You've already figured it out then. Amazing." he said in a slightly awed voice.

"Well you obviously did too, Cedric. How'd you figure it out? I did it on accident after I kicked the egg into the lake. It was more luck than anything else."

"I'm probably not supposed to tell anyone this, but it probably won't hurt for you to know. I didn't actually figure it out on my own. Professor Moody kept me after class last week and told me to take a bath with the egg. I thought he was crazy until I tried it and it worked. Actually, he probably still is crazy but that's not the point. I would still be clueless if it weren't for him." Cedric admitted. Harry nodded, wondering why Professor Moody would help Cedric out this time but not before the first task.

"Thanks anyway, Cedric. I hope one of us wins." Cedric nodded in agreement and the three began to chat about their expectations for the ball when the doors opened and Fleur Delacour walked in, escorted by a Hogwarts seventh year that Harry recognized but could not name. Her date was staring at her trying not to drool on himself, obviously entranced by her Veela charms. Harry felt a slight pull from the charm, causing him to suddenly think about how attractive the Beauxbaton's champion was, but nothing more. Harry looked over at Cedric who was forcing himself to look away, apparently aware of the effects of the Veela charm. For whatever reason, Fleur's Veela powers were especially strong tonight. Cho seemed to understand what was happening, because she simply laughed.

"It's ok Cedric, I know it isn't your fault." she reassured him.

"I'm just annoyed that Harry doesn't seem to be having any trouble with it at all." Cedric answered.

"I feel it, just not as strong as other people I guess. I heard that she had guys throwing themselves at her feet, begging her to go the ball with them. Some people can't fight it." Harry explained, grateful for his natural resistance that enabled him to not make a fool of himself.

"Yeah, I saw your friend Weasley do just that." Cho added, not knowing that Ron and Harry weren't exactly friends anymore. Harry did not bother to correct her. Moments later their attention was again drawn to the opening door to see Viktor Krum walk in with a pretty girl in a blue dress. It took Harry's brain a few seconds to register what he was seeing. Hermione was Viktor Krum's date. She had managed to tame her bushy hair, Harry assumed she used magic to do so.

"Hermione?" Harry said, a little uncertainly. Hermione smiled and dragged her date over to where Harry, Cedric, and Cho were standing. Harry's mouth was still open from the shock of seeing how attractive his friend looked. "You look great, Hermione." The rest of the school was going to be in for a surprise when she walked in.

"Thank you, Harry. Harry, I want you to meet Viktor. Viktor, this is Harry Potter, Cedric Diggory, and Cho Chang." she said, introducing everyone.

"Hello. It is very nice to meet you." Krum said a bit uncertainly, then looked towards Hermione who was smiling and nodding. The others all said hello to Krum and the two champions shook his hand.

"That was great, Viktor!" Hermione said proudly. "English isn't his first language, but he is getting much better at it." Krum nodded then turned towards Harry with a very serious look on his face.

"Potter," he began, "I want you to know that I would never use Hermione's friendship against you in the tournament." It took Krum a while to get the sentence out completely, especially when he came to Hermione's name. Harry nodded, understanding what the Bulgarian was trying to say.

"Thank you, but I didn't think Hermione would tell you anything I wouldn't want her to." Harry answered. Hermione rushed over and hugged Harry, having obviously been worried about how he would react. Krum looked happy that Harry wasn't angry at Hermione, but a little upset that she was hugging him. Harry inwardly laughed a little and guided Hermione back to Krum's side.

"So Harry, now you know who my date is. Where is yours?" Hermione asked.

"I thought she would be here by now. She's -" Harry paused, seeing the door begin to open. "Here."

At this everyone turned to look towards the door as Daphne walked in. Her dress was black and silver, made from the finest materials, and fit her perfectly. Harry rushed towards the door to meet her, the whole time wearing a silly grin on his face. As he led Daphne over to the group Hermione let out a small gasp when she finally recognized who Harry's date was. Harry's eyes had not left Daphne since she came in, and she was also smiling brightly at her date.

"You look amazing. I mean, really... uhh... wow." Harry stammered, trying to think of the right thing to say. Apparently what he said was close enough because she gave him a small hug and took his hand as they approached the group. "Everybody, this is Daphne Greengrass..." Harry said and began introducing everyone. The whole time Hermione was looking back and forth at Harry and Daphne with a look of suspicion on her face.

"I wasn't aware that you two knew each other." Hermione stated, practically begging them to explain what was going on.

"Oh yes," Daphne answered, "we've known each other since first year. Isn't that right?" She looked at Harry who nodded in agreement, causing Hermione's look of suspicion to deepen. Harry, seeing what Daphne was doing to Hermione, was trying not to laugh. The rest of the group could feel the tension in the air and was looking at the three a bit nervously.

"That's right. She's been a good friend to me when I've needed it, Hermione, especially this year." Harry replied. Hermione grimaced a bit at his comment, but nodded anyway. Harry was watching her, trying to judge how his friend would react to the revelation. Hermione seemed to be processing the new information, unsure of what to do. Finally, she made her decision.

"It's a pleasure to meet you." Hermione said, turning to look directly at Daphne. "I hope that any friend of Harry's could be a friend of mine." Harry smiled, breathing a small sigh of relief. The tension in the room relaxed a little.

"Of course." Daphne answered. "We both know he needs all the friends looking out for him he can get." Harry's smile dropped a little as he noticed the two girls turn his attention towards him and wondered when he had become the focus of the conversation. He looked to Cedric, hoping for a little help but his fellow champion was laughing.

"Right, I tend to do crazy things." Harry said with a shrug. He sensed that though Hermione had accepted his relationship with Daphne, she still wasn't entirely comfortable with it. Daphne, on the other hand, was trying to be friendly because she knew it would make the situation easier on the both of them. He would just have to hope things turned out for the best.

"So you're the one who has been helping Harry with the tournament this whole time." Hermione realized. "He accidentally let it slip that someone other than Neville or myself was helping him but would never say who."

"Yeah, she is even the one who suggested trying to talk to the dragon. I thought the idea was nuts." Harry replied.

"But you were the one who went through with it and even let the dragon get close enough to lick you." Daphne reminded him. Harry shrugged and didn't argue with her point. Hermione was watching them interact with each other, trying to determine how close they actually were to each other.

"Harry, what did you say to that dragon?" Cedric asked. "Everyone wanted to know but you never really said anything about it." The question had gotten Krum's attention as well.

"Don't believe that nonsense about me ordering the dragon around. I just pointed out that one of the eggs wasn't real and asked if I could

take it." Those who hadn't heard the story laughed, surprised that it worked out as well for him as it did.

"Attention please!" Professor McGonagall called as she walked in the room. She briefly looked at the couples and Harry could see the brief flash of surprise when she saw Daphne at his side. "Now that you are all here we can begin. You will all exit that door which will take you out into the Great Hall. Since this afternoon it has been enlarged and decorated to fit our purposes. Once you are all on the dance floor the music will start and the first dance will begin. When you finish you will be directed to a table at the front of the room where you will all sit together, joined by a few others. Any questions? No? Very well, line up. Ms Delacour, you will be first. Then Mr Diggory, followed by Mr Krum, and finally Mr Potter with Ms Greengrass. Good luck everyone, and do try to have a good time." Professor McGonagall then left out the door she had previously pointed to, leaving it open for the champions and their dates to walk out of. They could all hear the murmuring from the crowd of students that were waiting on the other side of the door, and each felt a little bit nervous though they tried not to show it. As asked, Fleur Delacour and her date walked out first. The awaiting crowd immediately burst into applause which continued as Cedric and Cho linked arms and walked out the door.

"Are you ready for this?" Harry quietly asked Daphne, offering her his arm as he had seen the others do. As he did, Krum and Hermione had entered the Great Hall and loud gasps could be heard in the applause as people realized that the pretty girl in the blue dress was the Gryffindor bookworm.

"Let's go." Daphne said in response as they headed towards the exit. Once into the Great Hall Harry first noticed that it did indeed look a lot bigger than normal. The long tables that were normally there had been removed and replaced with dozens of circular tables that could fit about twelve people each. A dance floor had been erected in front of the stage, and the other three couples were already there waiting on them. Initially, the crowd continued to cheer as Harry and Daphne made their way to the stage. Then people began to notice who Harry's date was and the applause began to lessen as the students began to talk amongst themselves in an excited fashion. By the time they reached the dance floor the clapping had died off completely,

and for the most part the talking had stopped as well as people openly stared at the couple.

Harry put an arm around Daphne preparing for the dance to begin and leaned in to whisper to her: "They're speechless. I told you that you looked good." Daphne chuckled at his compliment and made sure they were both in place for the dance. The music began softly, but as the couples began to move it seemed to swell and the tempo increased. Every eye was on the dancing champions, though most were on Harry Potter and his Slytherin date. He could sometimes hear parts of their conversations, most of which referenced articles from the Daily Prophet or the accusation that all Slytherins were evil. The most amusing ones came from the female population who were quite obviously jealous of Daphne. Harry attempted to block out the distractions and focus on what he was doing, desperate not to step on Daphne's toes or make a similar public mistake. So far he was doing a good job, at least he thought so.

Minutes later the dance ended and the crowd began to applaud again. Daphne leaned towards Harry and told him did excellent before they walked over to the table that McGonagall had discussed. Seated there were the other champions and their dates, Professor Dumbledore, Madame Maxine, Igor Karkaroff, and strangely Percy Weasley. Percy motioned for Harry to take a seat next to him but Harry acted like he didn't notice and sat at the other end of the table with Daphne on one side and Hermione on the other. Menus were presented to them and Harry was surprised to see that all he had to do to order was to call out the name of the food and it would appear in front of him. He ordered and was pleased to see his food appear in front of him just as he wanted it to.

During dinner the conversations around the table stayed on what seemed to be safe topics. Percy was apparently here representing Barty Crouch, his boss, who had been feeling ill. Harry noticed that Percy had turned into a blatant brown noser and decided to ignore him for the rest of the evening, glad that he had not taken the seat next to him. Daphne was sitting next to Cho Chang, and the two girls seemed to be getting along nicely. Slytherin and Ravenclaw thankfully did not suffer from the rivalry that Slytherin and Gryffindor

did. Harry turned towards Dumbledore and noticed the old professor was looking at him and Daphne with an amused look on his face.

"Harry, I am glad to see that you are doing your part to promote friendship between the houses. As you may have been aware, Gryffindors and Slytherins have not always been the best of friends." Dumbledore said, drastically understating the feud between the two houses. Curious about what the Headmaster thought, Harry was watching him for any sign that he disapproved of his decision to take Daphne to the Yule Ball but could not find any.

"Thank you sir, I'm quite happy with how it turned out." Harry said, now noticing that Daphne had been listening to his talk with Dumbledore. She smiled at him and then looked towards Dumbledore, wondering if he would say anything to her, but instead the Professor turned to face Madam Maxine and began to chat with her.

The dance floor began to fill with couples who had finished their meals. Noticing that Daphne had stopped eating, Harry asked her if she would like to dance. Daphne smiled and agreed and they walked hand in hand to begin dancing. The other couples seemed to automatically back away from them and make room, not that Harry minded. Harry's nervousness from the first dance had vanished now that they were not one of only four couples dancing. The current song was quite a bit slower, and Harry instinctually pulled her closer. He was pleased to see her smile when he did. For that moment Harry didn't care what anyone in the world said or thought because there was nowhere he would rather be. Unfortunately, their moment was about to be disturbed. They were in the middle of their third dance when Harry felt someone tapping on his shoulder. Turning to look he was met with the angry face of his roommate and former friend, Ron Weasley.

"Can I help you, Ron?" Harry asked, wondering why he was being interrupted.

"Yeah! You can tell me what you're doing with her." Ron answered, pointing at Daphne who was quickly getting upset.

"I'm dancing. I think it would be best if you left us alone now." Harry replied, trying to avoid making a scene but knowing Ron was likely to start one.

"She's a Slytherin! You can't trust any of them." the red head yelled, loud enough to get the attention of everyone on the dance floor. Harry's temper finally got the better of him and he was about to yell back a response when Daphne spoke up, cutting him off.

"No Weasley, the one he can't trust is you! You were the one who turned your back on who was supposed to be your best friend when he needed you the most. I was there for him when you weren't. And I will not let some jealous fool like you insult me or say otherwise. Turn around and walk off or I will make you regret it." Daphne commanded. At some point, Harry noticed, she had taken out her wand and was grasping it tightly. From the angry look on her face Harry could tell she was only moments away from cursing Ron. He lightly put his hand on her arm hoping hoping she would wait a moment before casting a spell.

"Go now, or I won't stop her." Harry said, glaring at his former friend. Ron looked at them both angrily, and then stormed off back towards where he had come from. Daphne was still fuming; a little angry that Harry had stopped her from casting some of the nasty spells that had come to mind when Ron had interrupted them. Harry quickly realized that they were not going to be able to just finish their dance because all of the people around them had stopped to watch the argument. Even though Ron had left they were still being stared at.

"Let's go outside and get some air, ok?" Harry suggested. Daphne nodded and held his hand as they walked outside to the garden that had been specially prepared for the Ball. A few people were already in the garden, but not nearly as many as were inside. Those couples that had come outside mostly seemed to be concerned only with each other as well. Finding an empty bench in a spot where he hoped they would not be disturbed, Harry sat down and motioned for Daphne to join him. For a few minutes that sat silently, allowing them both to calm down a little. Harry's anger was already a bit overwhelmed from the happiness he felt knowing that Daphne cared enough to defend him, even if it was just from Ron's moronic insults.

"You know I really do appreciate you standing up for me, but shouldn't it be my responsibility to defend you?" Harry eventually asked. "I am the guy after all, I thought that was supposed to be my role." His remark finally got her to smile a little, which was exactly what he wanted.

"Probably, but I didn't want you having all the fun cursing Weasley."

"My first reaction was actually to punch him in the nose, but your idea was probably better. That reminds me, where were you keeping your wand in that dress?" Harry's question finally got her to laugh.

"That's one of those secrets witches don't tell wizards." she replied, drawing a laugh out of Harry. They both relaxed after that and sat back on the bench enjoying the night and each other's company. Harry's arm was resting on the top of the bench behind Daphne, allowing her to lean in to him. He briefly wondered if they were being missed inside but quickly decided he liked where he was at just fine. Neither of them made any effort to move from where they were sitting.

Minutes later their peace was once again disrupted, this time by two people arguing who seemed to be headed their way. Harry quickly recognized one voice as belonging to Professor Snape and the other, foreign sounding voice belonged to Igor Karkaroff. Neither of the two men seemed to be aware that Harry and Daphne could hear them.

"Severus, you see it just as I do. The mark is growing darker every day." they overheard Karkaroff saying.

"Perhaps so. What will you do then, flee?"

"Maybe. And you?"

"I will stay here, where I am protected. If you run they will find you, Igor. You must know that." Snape warned the other man.

"We'll see." Karkaroff said before walking off. Professor Snape didn't move for a moment, apparently thinking about the conversation. As he turned to walk off he finally noticed Harry and Daphne, cuddled

together on the bench and looking at him with interested expressions on their faces. Snape knew they had heard him, but decided it was best not to mention his discussion at all.

"Ah, Ms Greengrass. I find myself disappointed with your apparent lack of taste." the potions professor said while scowling at Harry. Daphne knew better than to challenge her head of house when he was in a bad mood and said nothing. Harry decided to follow her lead and choked back the angry response that had come to mind. Seeing that they were not going to argue with him, Snape scowled one last time and turned to walk back towards the Ball.

"What do you think that was about?" Harry asked when Snape was finally out of sight. Daphne seemed to be concentrating on something.

"Did you hear Karkaroff say 'the mark is growing darker'? I wonder if he meant the dark mark. It would make sense, they were both Death Eaters."

"Snape was a Death Eater?" Harry asked with surprise. He had always believed his professor was evil, but he did not know he had followed Voldemort. It certainly changed the way he looked at the man.

"Of course he was, you didn't know that?" Daphne asked. "I thought everyone did, but maybe that is just a Slytherin thing. They say that after the Dark Lord disappeared Dumbledore began telling everyone who would listen that Snape had been his spy during the war. Not everyone believed it, but it was enough to keep Snape out of Azkaban. They let Karkaroff go because he named a bunch of other Death Eaters after he got caught."

"Oh, I never knew." Harry answered, taking in the new information. "It sounded like they were both scared, would they be like that just because their mark was getting darker?"

"Who knows? I guess I better tell my father this in my next letter. Maybe he will know what it means." Daphne replied. "Do you want to go back in?"

"Sure, if you want to." Daphne nodded and they walked inside where a band called the Weird Sisters was now playing. Harry had never heard of them, but their music sounded somewhat like a muggle rock band. The rest of their night passed relatively calmly, much to Harry's relief. In the remaining hours they talked to various people and to just each other or danced along with the rest of the students. Sometimes people looked at them oddly, as if not knowing what to make of the Gryffindor / Slytherin couple, but for the most part they were left alone. Harry wondered how much of that was a result of Daphne's threats towards Ron earlier in the night.

Finally the party was coming to an end and it was time for them to leave. Only a few couples were left on the dance floor and the band had announced their last song. A few house elves could be seen beginning to clean up what was left of the food and drinks. Most of the professors had left and those that remained were constantly checking the time, eager to make the students go back to their dorms so they could go to bed. Sensing the ball was now over, Harry offered to walk Daphne back to her common room and she agreed.

"I don't think the reactions we got were that bad." Harry said as they walked towards the the Slytherin dungeons.

"Not tonight no, but just wait until the shock wears off. If the next week passes without anyone trying to call you evil because of this then I will be relieved. But I doubt that will happen." Harry shrugged, deciding to wait and see.

"On the bright side, I didn't see Rita Skeeter there so maybe this won't end up in the Daily Prophet."

"Neither did I, but that doesn't mean she wasn't there. She always seems to be where she is least wanted." Harry nodded in agreement. Soon they were at the entrance of the Slytherin common room.

"So what is it going to be like for you in there?" Harry asked, still worried about her safety.

"I will be fine tonight, assuming my little sister is already asleep. If not I will be attacked five seconds after I walk inside." Harry chuckled;

knowing that her sister would only be tossing questions Daphne's way. Tonight had changed a lot for both of them, but they would not find out how much in some ways until later.

"This was fun, I'm glad you said yes." Harry finally said, unsure of what to do now that the date was ending. They were still holding hands with her head leaning on his shoulder, and Harry was reluctant to let her go.

"It was, I'm glad you asked." Daphne replied. Harry smiled and, after gathering up all of the courage he could muster, turned his head towards hers and softly kissed her on the lips. Her hesitation only lasted for a moment before she returned the kiss. When they finally pulled apart they were wearing almost identical happy grins. With one last hug Daphne let go and walked towards the door, but before she went in she turned and said: "Goodnight, Harry."

"Goodnight, Daphne" he answered, still smiling. Once she was through the door Harry turned and began his walk back to the Gryffindor dorms, thinking to himself that it had been a pretty good night after all.

Author's Note:

So there you go, the Yule Ball has come and gone. This chapter was a little bit longer than the others but there was more to cover. It seems that Ron was destined to be a jerk on this night, only in this case he got to Harry before he could get to Hermione. Next chapter Harry and Daphne face the aftermath.

Thanks once again for all of the encouragement. It really is great to hear that people are enjoying this story. A few have asked if I plan on continuing this past fourth year and the answer is I had not planned to but the story seems to have grown to the point where it almost demanding I continue. There are still a few surprises left for this year though so stay tuned.

Another question I got was how powerful is Harry, especially after Hermione's comments about his ability to cast the Incendio spell. My take on things is that it took all of his strength and concentration to

hold the spell for three minutes, but someone like Dumbledore or Voldemort could cast the spell all day long while juggling chainsaws with the other hand if they wanted to. Harry's definitely strong for his age, but he has a long way to go before he could match Voldemort's power.

The next morning Harry awoke in a good mood, the events of the previous night still fresh on his mind. Checking the time, he realized that he had slept later than he normally did. Although from the sounds of his roommates' snores he guessed he was not the only one. He wasn't at all surprised by that. The Yule Ball lasted until late into the night and for those who were eager to continue the fun a couple of unofficial after parties had been thrown. Harry had decided against attending any of those and so even though he was the last of his roommates to leave the Ball he was still the first one back to the room.

Harry had slept too late to make it to breakfast, so he decided to make a quick stop by the kitchens and pick up a snack before heading out to the Quidditch pitch. The urge to spend the morning flying on his Firebolt had hit him strongly as he was getting out of bed and since he had nothing else planned it seemed like a great idea. If he had thought about it, he might have realized that all of his actions that morning were solitary as if he wanted to avoid everyone. However that thought had not occurred to him.

Harry walked out the doors of the Quidditch locker rooms and immediately realized something was very wrong with the pitch. The goal posts had all been pulled down at some point in the last couple of days and the grass had been ripped up as well, exposing the dark brown dirt below. He knew there was no reason to keep the pitch as is since there would be no Quidditch that year but the destruction of the place he enjoyed so much disturbed him. Harry gazed at the field for a few minutes, sadly wishing that he had never heard of the Triwizard Tournament. Pushing thoughts of the ruined field away, Harry mounted his broom and began to fly. He had worried that with no Quidditch practice his skills would fade, but apparently all of those people who claimed he was a natural on a broom had a point. For the next few hours Harry pushed the broom to its top speeds and forced it into tight turns that would have hurled most riders off of the broom and down onto the ground below.

Harry ended his morning flight when he noticed that it was time for lunch, he was in no mood to miss two meals in a row. Landing by the door to the locker rooms Harry took one last look at the field, wondering what reason Dumbledore could have possibly had for tearing it apart. Shaking his head at the situation, Harry turned

around and went inside. When he reached the Great Hall he saw that it was now back to its original configuration. All evidence of the Yule Ball from the night before had been completely removed by the house elves. A quick glance towards the Gryffindor table revealed that neither Neville nor Hermione were there, however Ron was. Looking towards the Slytherin table he saw that Daphne was there and had noticed him walking into the room. She also happened to have an empty seat in front of her...

"Good morning, Daphne." he said, sitting down at the table across from her. The hall was mostly empty, in fact he didn't see any of the other Slytherin fourth years, but the Slytherins that did see him sit at their table began to excitedly talk to each other while trying to decide whether or not to do anything about.

"You realize this may be the first time in decades that a Gryffindor has tried to eat at the Slytherin table?" she asked, although from her smile she obviously thought it was funny too.

"Really? I guess there is a first time for everything then. So was your sister as bad as you thought she would be?"

"I spent three hours answering her questions this morning." Daphne said. "In the end she said I should tell anyone who had a problem with me to 'piss off'."

"Good, I agree. So do I have the Astoria seal of approval then?" Harry asked, still curious about her little sister's opinion. He had not thought about it much yet, but her family's approval of him seemed to be an important issue.

"Not yet. You have to go through the interrogation next, but you should be fine. She doesn't seem to care about house rivalries, I must have taught her well." Harry agreed and for a while they continued to eat and chat as if there was nothing odd about them doing so. The other Slytherins had apparently decided to do nothing for the moment, but that changed when Draco Malfoy walked in flanked by cronies Crabbe and Goyle.

"Potter! Get the hell away from my table!" Malfoy yelled, grabbing the attention of both Harry and Daphne who had not noticed him until that point. He had also managed to get the attention of all of the other people in the Great Hall.

"I don't think I will. Daphne and I are enjoying a nice, quiet lunch. Why don't you sit down and do the same?" Harry said calmly. As he talked he had turned his body in such a way that Malfoy could not see him pull his wand out of his robes.

"You think you're something special, don't you Potter. That Boy-Who-Lived crap has finally driven you mad. It's not enough for you to enter the Triwizard Tournament illegally and get away with it but now you are stupid enough to think you can sit at my table like you own it. You'll pay for that." With that Malfoy reached for his wand and pointed it towards Harry while yelling out "Stupefy!" Harry had the advantage of already having his wand out and ready so when Malfoy reached for his he cast a shield charm big enough to cover both himself and Daphne. When Malfoy's stunner hit the shield there was a brief sizzling noise and what looked like a red splash against a light blue dome. Angry that his first attack didn't work Malfoy switched to a more dangerous spell and screamed "Reducto!" This spell too failed when it hit Harry's shield. Harry thought Draco was going to try for a third spell when he was interrupted.

"Fifty points from Gryffindor and a week's detention, Potter!" Professor Snape said angrily as he walked up to them and forced Malfoy to lower his wand. "Duelling is not allowed in the Great Hall."

"Severus," the voice of Professor Dumbledore called from behind him "I believe I must have had a better view of what happened. Mr Potter clearly only cast a shield charm in self defense, perhaps your punishment should instead be given to Mr Malfoy who if I am not mistaken cast two offensive spells and was preparing to cast a third?"

"Of course, Headmaster." Snape answered in a low growl, clearly not happy with the outcome.

"Also, five points for Gryffindor for a wonderful demonstration of the Protego shield charm. Enjoy the rest of your meal, everyone."

Dumbledore gave Harry a small wink before turning and heading back to the professor's table. Snape scowled at Harry before following him, leaving Malfoy still standing in front of Harry and Daphne madder than ever.

"I'll get you for this, Potter. You and your whore." Draco said, sending a threatening glare at Daphne. Before either of them could respond Malfoy had walked off with Crabbe and Goyle in tow. The rest of the Slytherin students at the table seemed more unsure than ever about how to react to Harry. Eventually they just went back to their lunches, trying to pretend nothing had happened. Harry looked up at Daphne and frowned.

"I guess I should have known that would happen. It's been far too long since Malfoy had tried to attack me. Should I go?" Harry asked.

"No, the damage is done anyway. He is a pest, nothing more. Did you know he really doesn't have many friends in Slytherin? Sure, he has allies but almost no one who hangs around him does it because they like him. I can handle Malfoy if I have to." she said confidently. "How are the Gryffindor's reacting?"

"It's hard to say. Nobody seems to have made up their minds yet, other than Ron of course. Then again I haven't talked to any of them today." he explained. "Maybe it won't be that bad."

"We'll see. Oh, and I before I forget I needed to tell you that I am mad at you." Daphne said, but oddly didn't look or sound that mad at all.

"What? Why?" Harry asked, trying to think of anything he could have done to upset her and not coming up with anything.

"You've been holding back on me when we practice. You cast that Protego non-verbally, how long have you been working on that?" Harry sighed, realizing that she was right. He didn't want to discourage her and thought it might be a good idea not to show her things he could do that she couldn't yet. She was learning, but he still had the advantage.

"The past two or three weeks. I can't do it on every spell, and usually when I can the spells are weaker. I didn't even realize I had cast the spell silently until you said something about it. We can work on it together from now on." Daphne nodded in agreement. "There's something else I need to tell you too. Last week Hermione asked if she could come with me one night while I trained. I told her to wait until after Christmas and ask again if she still wanted to because I didn't want to have to explain why you were there yet. I haven't seen her yet today, but when I do the first thing out of her mouth is going to be to tell me she still wants to. That's just the way she is."

Daphne sat and thought about how she felt about Hermione joining them. She was a little surprised by the jealous feeling that sprang up inside her, insisting that Hermione not be allowed to come because she would be intruding on her time with Harry. Daphne pushed that feeling away, telling herself that it wouldn't matter anymore because she could talk to him publicly like they were doing now. "That will be fine," Daphne finally said, "assuming she still wants to come."

"Great." Harry replied. "So I saw the Daily Prophet today and they didn't mention anything about the Yule Ball."

"I think that was because it happened so late last night they didn't have time to write the stories for the morning paper. You know how obsessively they have been covering everything about this tournament, they are going to say something about it. Wait until tomorrow, then we'll see." Harry nodded, his face dropping into a small frown.

"Ah, and here I thought we had just gotten a lucky break." he said with a half-hearted laugh. They then began discussing what they wanted to do with the rest of the day since they did not have classes or anything else to do. In the end they ended up taking a walk outside, enjoying the fact that they no longer had to meet in secret.

As Harry had expected, Hermione asked him about watching and hopefully participating in his training as soon as she saw him. He agreed and gave her directions to the third floor classroom he had been using. She excitedly told him that he wouldn't regret it and that she had something for him to practice tonight. Harry wasn't very

happy with her thinking she could dictate his lessons, but decided he would just have to show her what he had been doing to make her understand. Harry and Daphne actually were in the room thirty minutes, discussing what they were going to do about Hermione and what they would tell her.

Right on time, Hermione walked through the door and a small look of surprise crossed her face when she saw Daphne.

"Hello Daphne, Harry didn't tell me you would be here too." Hermione said while setting her book bag down on a desk. Daphne smiled and gave a small wave in response.

"Actually, she has been helping me out for a while now. That's part of why I told you to wait until after Christmas to ask about my training again."

"What's going on, Harry?" Hermione asked, knowing that there was a lot to the story she was not being told.

"There are a couple of reasons why she has been training with me. One, we knew that some of our classmates might not like the fact that we went to the Yule Ball together and are... well, friends now I suppose." Harry added the last part uncertainly; unsure exactly what their relationship was now. Certainly more than friends. Were they dating? Or would he have to ask her out on multiple dates before they were dating? Deciding not to confuse himself with that, he pushed it from his mind but not before Daphne saw his brief look of confusion and smiled at what she knew he was thinking.

"And the other part is that we believe the return of the Dark Lord is imminent, and when that day comes we will both be in his way so we should be prepared." Daphne said, stepping in to finish for Harry. Hermione's jaw dropped and she looked back and forth between Harry and Daphne looking for some indication that they were joking. The serious looks on their faces said otherwise.

"Harry, you're really serious about this aren't you? Surely Dumbledore wouldn't allow that to happen." Hermione argued, eliciting a small frown from Harry.

"Dumbledore is not a god, Hermione. He can't control everything. Voldemort has made two attempts to come back since we've come to Hogwarts and the only reason he didn't succeed was luck. One day we won't be so lucky, and what then?" Harry pleaded with Hermione, who though still not happy was beginning to nod in agreement with his points. "I can't escape him; he is going to keep coming for me no matter what. Daphne and her family have been preparing for this since the Death Eater attack this summer, and I respect the choice they have made. You might still be able to escape this Hermione. It's doubtful because you are muggleborn, but if you back off now Voldemort won't have any other reason to target you."

"You're talking about me abandoning you again, aren't you? I won't do it, Harry! Not even if you act like you want me to." she replied forcefully. At this Harry and Daphne shared a look and nodded, as if they were waiting on her to say what she did. Harry walked over to Hermione and pulled her into a friendly, reassuring hug.

"Thank you, Hermione." he said as he released the hug. "I just hope you know what you've gotten yourself into."

"Trouble, I assume. As always." she answered. Daphne watched the friends with a small smile. She did not think that she would ever be the best of friends with Hermione, but it was clear the other girl was now fiercely loyal to Harry. Her disappointment with her own previous behavior had pushed her to that extreme, never again would she betray her friend. When the war finally came, Daphne knew, there was nothing that would keep Hermione from standing by his side. Their job was to help her become a witch that would be useful when that day came.

"So Daphne, what do you think?" Harry turned and asked.

"Welcome to the club." she answered with a shrug. Harry and Hermione both laughed, but then Hermione got an excited look on her face and ran off towards her book bag. She had pulled out several books, looking for the right one, until she eventually found the book she was looking for. She then began rapidly turning the pages.

"She does this sometimes." Harry said to Daphne, loud enough for Hermione to hear. Hermione finally found the page she was looking for and rushed back over to Harry, holding the book out for him to take. "What's this, Hermione?"

"The answer you've been looking for, of course. Instructions on how to perform the Bubble Head Charm, which will allow you to breathe underwater." she stated with a proud smile on her face. Harry and Daphne both wore shocked expressions on their faces, thrilled that Hermione had been able to find the answer to their dilemma when neither of them had yet been able to.

"That's brilliant, Hermione!" Harry finally exclaimed, taking the book and beginning to read. Daphne sat down next to him and began reading while Hermione simply waited for them to finish. When Harry was done he handed the book back to Daphne and started practicing the wand movements. "Have you tried this one yet?"

"No, not yet." Hermione answered. "I don't think it is supposed to be a difficult spell, but I didn't want to risk trying it without someone else there to help me if it went wrong."

"What do you mean, went wrong?" Harry asked.

"I was worried that I might get the bubble to appear but not the air in it." Hermione answered. Harry nodded, agreeing that would be a bad result.

"Well, here goes nothing..." Harry said, starting the wand movement that began with him waving his wand around his head and ended with him tapping himself on the head. As he finished he clearly and forcefully said the incantation: "Aer Caputus!" and was rewarded with the sight of a transparent bubble forming around his head. He had been nervously holding his breath as he cast the spell, a fact which took him several seconds to realize. Hesitantly, he took in a breath and was pleased to find that it was normal, breathable air. "It worked!" Daphne rushed over to him and gave him a hug in congratulations, and then began to poke at the bubble with her finger to see if it would break. The bubble remained intact, even when

Daphne stopped using her finger and started trying to burst the bubble with a quill.

"I think this will work, Harry. The bubble is a lot stronger than it looks." Daphne said approvingly. "Now try to cancel the spell." Harry nodded and tapped himself on head again which caused the bubble to disappear. "Good!" she said in encouragement.

"Now you just have to try it underwater." Hermione added.

"I was thinking about that," Harry responded, "and now that I have a way to stay underwater I want to start exploring the lake. That way I will have a better idea of where I am going for the second task. Before I do that though, I need to figure out what is living in the lake. I know there are Merpeople, grindylows, and the giant squid but what else?"

"I'll look into it, Harry" Hermione said eagerly. "Oh, and if it makes you feel any better Viktor hasn't been able to figure out how to get the clue from the egg yet."

"And how was your date with the international Quidditch star?" Daphne asked, resulting in a small blush from Hermione.

"It was... good." Hermione answered, still blushing and smiling. Daphne laughed a little seeing how uncomfortable the other girl was gossiping about her date.

"Cedric already knew." Harry said suddenly, referring to the egg, "Professor Moody told him." As he said that he got the feeling that the Defense Against the Dark Arts Professor's behavior was very odd. Why would he tell Harry about the first task but not Cedric? Or tell Cedric about the second task but not Harry? If he just wanted someone from Hogwarts to win it would be better to tell them both. Moody also tried to help him plan for the first task, but he had not done anything like that this time. 'Maybe Moody is just mad, like everyone says.' Harry thought, trying to shake the confused feeling.

"That was nice of Professor Moody." Hermione said. But Daphne's face had a small frown on it, causing Harry to wonder if she was

having thoughts similar to his. Before he could continue that thought Hermione was talking again, asking him a question. "Harry, is there another room somewhere in the castle we can use? This is a great location and it's private, but it's also too small."

"I can check the Marauder's Map for something else, but nothing comes to mind. Maybe I could ask Dobby." The second he said Dobby's name the small house elf popped into the room, throwing himself at Harry's feet.

"Is Master Harry Potter calling Dobby?" he asked, happy that Harry wanted him there. Harry, meanwhile, was a little uncomfortable with the affection the elf was showing him.

"Dobby, do you know of somewhere in the castle we can practice magic? We would need it to be private like this room, but bigger."

"Maybe, Harry Potter, sir." Dobby said, looking thoughtful. "Dobby will look and ask the other house elves. Dobby will not disappoint you sir!" The small house elf disappeared as quickly as he had appeared, leaving Daphne laughing at the elf's odd behavior and Hermione muttering something about 'poorly treated elves'.

"If there is a better place in this castle, Dobby will find it." Harry assured them both. "Alright, now you two should practice the Bubble Head Charm. Like Hermione said, it isn't that difficult." The rest of the evening was spent with them learning the new spell and testing what they could do with it. Neither of them was able to successfully perform the spell on their first try. Daphne finally managed to do it after ten minutes of trying, and Hermione five minutes after that. By the time they finished experimenting with the new spell it was late and they decided to call it quits. Hermione left for the Gryffindor common room while Harry escorted Daphne back to the Slytherin dorms.

On the way it was hard to miss the stares they received whenever they passed by the other students. What was most amusing to them was the variety of expressions on the faces of the people who were staring. Some were angry, others fearful, and a great many of them were simply interested or confused. Harry and Daphne either laughed it off or ignored them, not wanting to deal with people asking them to

explain their relationship. Not that either of them was quite sure how to define that relationship at the moment either. Both were curious what the other thought, but neither of them had brought up the topic. For now neither of them minded that, content to just enjoy the moment. Things might get difficult in the near future and they were not eager to take on any more worries.

Unknown to them, at that very moment a fresh round of attacks from the Daily Prophet was being printed and prepared for delivery courtesy of their least favorite reporter: Rita Skeeter.

RISING DARK LORD PICKS HIS DARK LADY?

by Rita Skeeter

Have the fears of the wizarding world that Harry Potter has turned dark now been confirmed? This reporter has long argued that there is something very wrong with the young Triwizard Champion and his actions this year have done nothing to refute that. My faithful readers will surely remember the Boy-Who-Lived's reckless use of dark magic which turned a wild dragon into his mindless slave, an event the Ministry still refuses to investigate.

The fact that Potter has been lost to the darkness was all but confirmed at Hogwarts Yule Ball. For weeks the student population had been speculating on who Potter would take to the Yule Ball, with most sources claiming he would attend with his long time love interest Hermione Granger. In a shocking turn of events Granger spurned the affections of the young Triwizard Champion in favor of his Durmstrang rival, Viktor Krum! Perhaps it was this rejection that blackened the young man's heart and soul, we can only guess.

Freshly rejected by Hermione Granger, Harry Potter turned to the dark embrace of Daphne Greengrass from Slytherin house. The Greengrasses, as you may remember, have a long history of supporting dark wizards. In fact, Daphne Greengrass's uncle Gabriel Greengrass is a convicted Death Eater and resides in Azkaban to this very day! Dear readers, I shiver when I think of what it might mean that the defeater of You-Know-Who is embracing not just the dark arts but the followers of the former dark lord as well. Now is the time

for the Ministry to step in and act, before Dark Lord Potter becomes a menace even they can not stop.

But perhaps there is hope. Our sources at Hogwarts tell me that Potter and Greengrass were not known acquaintances before the Yule Ball. Very few could recall the two ever talking to each other. There is therefore a chance that Ms Greengrass has somehow managed to gain control of Mr Potter, perhaps through use of love potions or the Imperious Curse. Her control over Potter was evidenced during an altercation during the Yule Ball in which Potter's best friend, Ronald Weasley, attempted to bring Potter to his senses and break Greengrass's influence over his friend. His brave attempt failed when Greengrass threatened Mr Weasley (with all sorts of dark magic no doubt), an action which drew no protest from Harry Potter. Action must be taken now if there is any hope of saving Harry Potter's soul! Will anyone act? Only time will tell.

The article in the Daily Prophet circulated quickly and within hours of its delivery almost everyone in Hogwarts had read it. Once again the fickle nature of the student body was evident in their reactions. However, there was a growing minority that had noted the inaccuracies in the Daily Prophet's reporting and was beginning to question whether or not their main source of information could be trusted. This small, but growing, group mainly consisted of fourth year students who had come to know Harry over the past four years. It was possible, they believed, to think that Harry could have gotten past the age line and put his name in the Goblet of Fire. Several people, including Fred and George Weasley, had attempted that and were not thought poorly of. Why should Harry be treated any different? But could Harry Potter be turning evil, as the Daily Prophet alleged? The claim was too ridiculous to accept for many of them. One thing was certain: opinions were starting to polarize. The amount of people who had yet to make up their minds was rapidly decreasing.

Support for Harry was strongest in Gryffindor and Hufflepuff, where Cedric Diggory had been able to convince many of his housemates to ignore the slanderous articles from the Daily Prophet. The Hufflepuff's trusted Diggory, and if he approved of Potter that was enough for them to give the subject a second thought. Cho Chang was acting as Ravenclaw's voice of reason, although not as successfully as her

Hufflepuff boyfriend. Most of the Slytherins were against Harry out of habit, but a few were more curious about Daphne's relationship with him.

The Daily Prophet's vicious lies about Harry were beginning to have an effect that no one had foreseen, because the more the newspaper attacked him the larger the group of people who realized they were being lied to grew. And if the Prophet was lying about Harry Potter, what else could they be lying about? Slowly, a still small number of them were beginning to ask questions and think for themselves. Though hardly noticeable to most observers, things were starting to change.

Author's Note:

And there's another chapter out the door. Things are going to start moving a little more quickly from here on out, with everyone's actions causing the timeline as shown in cannon to be altered in much larger ways. By the end of the year things will be vastly different, which will mean many of the challenges the characters face from then on will be unrecognizable. By necessity, a lot of things in this part of the story remain the same as the book. For instance, there is really nothing Harry or Daphne's friendship could have done to stop Barty Crouch Jr from capturing and impersonating Moody. But now things can be altered in larger ways.

Some of you may be wondering about Hermione's newfound sense of loyalty. In some ways I see her character's conversion and fervent belief in Harry to be much like a person who changes religions late in life (if you aren't sure what I mean by this, just wait until you meet one). Oddly enough, Hermione is also seeking forgiveness and a shot at redemption which makes the comparison a little more apt. Hope that makes sense to all of you.

Thanks again to everyone who reads or comments. I've written other things in the past, but this is my first try at fan fiction. I'm enjoying how the story is turning out so far and I hope you are too. The story will definitely continue past this year up until when Harry is finally ready to take down Voldemort. I couldn't end it too soon, there are just too many plot points I would like to play around with.

"Neville, have I ever told you how much I despise Rita Skeeter?" Harry looked up from the article in the the Daily Prophet that he was reading. Neville had shown him the article during breakfast, deciding that his friend would be interested in seeing what was printed about him. The angry look on Harry's face made it clear he was not happy with what he read.

"Only once or twice, Harry." Neville laughed.

"If I ever do go dark, it may just be so I can get back at her." Harry said. "I wonder what Daphne is going to say about it."

"They were actually harsher on her than you." Neville pointed out. "But I don't think she has a temper quite like yours."

"I'm curious Neville, what do you think of Daphne?" Harry asked, hoping that his other good friend would not have any issues with her. He had decided that Hermione was not going to be a problem after seeing the two girls interact with each other the previous night. They were polite to each other, though not exactly friendly. Maybe one day that would change, it would certainly be easier on him if it did.

"I don't have any problems with her. We're actually distantly related, but that isn't surprising considering we are both from pureblood families. My great grandmother was her great grandfather's sister, I guess that makes us third cousins." Neville explained with a small shrug. Neville, like Daphne, had also been taught not only their own family's history but about the other pureblood families. He found the customs and traditions to be mostly annoying and outdated, but his grandmother insisted he learn them and Neville rarely said no to his grandmother.

"I see. So do you show up at each other's family reunions or something?"

"No, we're not closely related enough to do that. The Greengrasses and the Longbottoms have gone their separate ways. I don't think I've ever talked to her to be honest. She's never tried to insult me like most of the other Slytherins, so that counts for something. Plus, you seem to like her so she can't be all that bad." Harry smiled, happy

that he would probably not have to worry about Daphne and Neville not getting along with each other. He started to go back to his meal when he someone suddenly sat down in the seat next to him. Harry immediately recognized the younger brown haired girl.

"Hello Harry Potter." she said, "I'm Astoria Greengrass." Daphne's younger sister sat looking at him confidently while the others sitting at the long table looked at her with a mixture of surprise and amusement. Harry briefly thought that it would have been nice if the Slytherins had reacted that way when he sat at their table.

"Hi, can I help you?" Harry asked, unsure of what to say to the girl.

"Sure, you can tell me what your intentions are with my big sister." she said seriously. Harry had definitely not been expecting her to say that.

"Isn't that something a girl's dad normally asks a guy, not her little sister?" Harry said with a small laugh.

"Usually, but if you want her to be your Dark Lady I need to approve that you are a good Dark Lord." Astoria answered, her efforts to hold back her smile now starting to falter. Harry and Neville looked at each other when they heard this and both started laughing.

"Sorry, but I thought you were trying to be serious when you came over here." Harry replied.

"I do care about my sister, but she has answered all of my questions and vouched for you. I would give you the 'hurt her and die' speech but you're Harry freakin' Potter, so I'll just have to go with the 'hurt her and I will be a huge pain in your ass' speech."

"Fair enough." Harry said with a nod. Astoria looked at him seriously for a moment, as if trying to judge his reaction. Finally she seemed satisfied and got up to head back to her table. She only got a few steps before she turned back around with an odd grin on her face.

"You may have thought it was funny now, but we'll see how much you laugh when it is my dad asking the questions." Astoria said before

turning back and continuing towards her table. Harry's laughter seemed to die in his throat, realizing the young girl might have a point.

Hours later Harry was sitting in the library reading Hermione's favorite book *Hogwarts: A History*. He was hoping to find some reference to creatures living in the lake but had found nothing. He had first asked Daphne then Hermione if they wanted to help him with the research but they had both been forced to say no for the same reason. Classes would be beginning again in a few days and for them that meant a huge Ancient Runes project coming due that would count for a large chunk of their grades. Harry, having not taken Ancient Runes, did not share that problem.

After an hour of flipping through the book Harry slammed it shut with a frustrated grunt. 'I should have known there was nothing in there,' he thought 'Because Hermione would have mentioned it if there was. She has that book practically memorized.' Harry was walking down the aisles and looking at the titles of the books, hoping to find one that looked promising, when he heard the soft popping noise that occurs when house elves use their version of Apparition. Looking down he saw Dobby, smiling and bouncing with excitement.

"Harry Potter sir! Dobby is finding masters new room!" the little elf yelled.

"That's great Dobby! Where is it?" he asked.

"Seventh floor, sir. Follow me, Dobby will explain on the way." Dobby began jumping up and down waiting for Harry to follow him, and when Harry did start to walk towards the door he saw Dobby hopping instead of walking. The house elf seemed very pleased with himself.

"Dobby, I've been all over the seventh floor and I can't think of anywhere better than the classroom I am using now. And there my map doesn't show any large rooms either."

"Does Harry Potter's map know all the secrets of Hogwarts sir?" Dobby asked with a grin.

"Well, now that you mention it the Chamber of Secrets isn't on there. Are you saying that this room is a hidden room like that?" Harry asked as they began climbing the stairs up towards the upper levels of the castle. Thankfully the moving staircases were all aligned properly so they did not have to take a detour.

"Oh yes sir. The Come and Go room can be many things, all the Hogwarts house elves know that."

"Come and Go Room?" Harry asked curiously.

"You wizards call it the Room of Requirement, Dobby thinks. Come Harry Potter sir! We are getting close!" Dobby grew more excited the closer they got, hopping faster than ever. Harry was practically running in order to keep up with him. Finally Dobby hopped, tripped, and tumbled to a stop in front of a blank stretch of wall. "We're here!" he yelled happily.

"Dobby, there's no room here. There isn't even a painting hiding a door." Harry said skeptically.

"Not yet, sir. You need to think of what room you want and walk past this wall three times then POP! Your room will be there." Dobby explained.

"So if I wanted a bedroom, that is what would appear? Or a bathroom, or a library, or whatever else I could think of?" Harry asked, starting to realize the potential such a room would have.

"Yes!" Dobby said, nodding vigorously. Harry decided to try it and the first room that came to mind was an image of the Gryffindor common room. Walking past the wall once he looked up, hoping to see something but the wall remained unchanged. After his second pass still nothing had happened. Then, on his third time past the wall, a door began to appear. The wall around it seemed to melt away as if it were made of wax and the door had been hidden beneath it. When the changes finally stopped Harry grabbed the knob and threw the door open.

The room inside was an exact replica of the common room he had pictured in his mind. It even included Ron's chess set on a table in the corner, with the pieces arranged and ready to play. A fire was lit in the fireplace and gave a little warmth and light to the room. Harry rushed in, staring in awe at what seemed to be a perfect copy of the room he knew so well. Smiling, he walked up the stairs to the door that led to his bedroom and opened it only to be met with a wall instead of an entrance.

"I wonder why that happened?" Harry said. He then realized that he had only asked to see the common room, not all of the dorms attached to the common room as well. So when he used the room he would have to be very specific in what he asked for. "Dobby, you are the best elf ever."

Dobby gasped at Harry's praise and tears of joys began to leak from his eyes. The tiny elf rushed towards Harry and grabbed his leg in a tight hug. "Harry Potter is too kind!" he began repeating, only stopping after Harry spent several minutes calming him down. Harry didn't think he was being too kind though, this room had almost endless potential. And it seemed he was the only person who knew about it.

"Thank you, Dobby. You did great." Harry said seriously. The elf hugged him again and then popped away, explaining that he had to get back to work. Harry spent the next few hours experimenting with the room, quickly realizing that it would be the perfect place to move his training to.

Harry walked back into the library that night with an odd expression on his face. He was about to sit down at the table he had been using earlier in the day when he noticed Neville excitedly waving him over. Harry waved and then walked over to where his friend was sitting.

"Hey Harry. Is something wrong?" Neville asked, noticing Harry's expression.

"No, not wrong exactly. Just strange and unexpected."

"What are you talking about?"

"On my way in to the library Susan Bones stopped me. You know Susan, right? Our year, in Hufflepuff." Neville nodded, clearly recognizing who Harry was talking about. "Well anyway she comes up to me and says she is sorry I have to put up with all that garbage from the Daily Prophet, and that not everybody believes everything they read. Then she walked off and I came in here."

"She's right, Harry. Lots of people must know better than to listen to that stuff, right?" Neville asked.

"That's the problem, up until now it has seemed like almost everyone believed the worst about me. You not included, of course." Harry stated. Neither of them had noticed that someone had heard the last part of their conversation and was now standing behind Harry.

"But what if I wanted to be a Dark Lady?" a voice asked from behind Harry, causing him to turn and look for the source. He smiled when he saw Daphne smile back and sit next to him.

"I am sure that can be arranged, Daphne." Harry assured her. "Neville, meet Daphne. Daphne, meet Neville." Daphne and Neville exchanged hello's and other simple greetings. "I thought you had to work on an Ancient Runes project?"

"I do." Daphne answered. "The real reason I am here is to look up some things for the project, but as added bonus you get to see me."

"Great." Harry responded, smiling.

"Harry, I almost forgot what I wanted to talk to you about. I found a solution to your problem for the second task!" Neville explained happily.

"Is it the Bubble Head Charm? Hermione told me about that one last night." Harry said.

"What? Oh, well no it isn't that. There's this plant called Gillyweed and if you eat some you are supposed to grow fins and gills so you can breath underwater and move a lot easier." Neville explained.

"That actually sounds a lot more useful than the Bubble Head Charm." Harry noted. Daphne nodded, thinking the same thing.

"The only problem is that it is hard to find. You can buy it, but it will probably be pretty expensive."

"Harry, maybe what you should do is use the Bubble Head Charm to explore the lake but use Gillyweed in the actual tournament." Daphne suggested. Harry nodded in agreement, although he would like to try the gillyweed at least once before he used it in the second task. That way he could test the effects and see how long the change lasted.

"That's brilliant Neville, I never would have thought of that." Harry said in thanks.

"You're just lucky I found it in this book that Professor Moody gave me." Neville responded. Harry's smile immediately dropped into an expression of concentration.

"Harry, I think I've noticed something going on here." Daphne said with a similar expression on her face, "You're going to think this sounds crazy but..."

"But you've noticed how everything about this tournament keeps coming back to Professor Moody, right?" Harry finished for her. "First he tells me about the dragon, but not Cedric. Then, he tries to give me pointers on how to beat the dragon. Next, he tells Cedric what to do with the egg and Cedric just happens to rush over and tell me about it. And now, Neville conveniently finds the answer to our problems in a book he gave to him. What is he up to?"

"Harry, you're not thinking Professor Moody has gone dark are you?" Neville asked, shocked by where the conversation was headed. "That's crazy. They say that half of the dark wizards in Azkaban are only there because Mad Eye Moody put them there. I don't think he would ever turn dark."

"Maybe this isn't about him turning dark," Daphne suggested, "Maybe he has some other goal. What does he stand to gain by having Harry win the tournament?"

"Nothing." Harry responded. "So let's assume that he is the one who put my name in the Goblet of Fire, surely he is powerful enough of a wizard to do it, what's the point? He's helping me at every turn, so he obviously didn't put me in the tournament to get me hurt."

"Unless he is waiting for the third task to do it as some violent grand finale." Daphne pointed out.

"Well, yes. I guess it could be that." Harry said in agreement with her unpleasant thought. "But so far there is no proof he wants me to get hurt. Why should he care if I win the tournament or not?"

"What do you get for winning, Harry?" Neville asked.

"A thousand galleons and a trophy, I think."

"Neither of those are worth the effort. It has to be something else." Daphne stated. "Assuming it was Moody that put your name in the cup in the first place. It could be that he just wants to help you out because he knows you shouldn't be in the tournament in the first place."

"Do you really believe that?" Harry asked.

"No." Daphne answered truthfully. "But it is possible."

"What if this isn't about you winning, Harry." Neville said uncertainly. "Maybe he just doesn't want one of the others to win." Harry thought about it and shrugged.

"OK, but who would he possibly be trying to stop from winning? He did help Cedric a little, so it can't be him. That leaves Fleur Delacour and Viktor Krum. We know that Krum's headmaster was once a Death Eater, but there has to be more to it than that right?" Harry offered. The other two seemed to agree.

"If that was all he could have just helped out Diggory." Daphne said. "There would be no reason to enter Harry in the tournament in the first place. We're missing something, something important. I guess we should just watch and see what he does next."

"That's a great idea!" Harry replied with a grin. He then started digging through his book bag and came up with a plain looking piece of parchment. "I solemnly swear that I am up to no good." he said, tapping the parchment with his wand as he did. Immediately ink seemed to spread from where he had tapped the parchment, revealing the Marauder's Map. Daphne had heard about the map but never seen it and was now staring at it in awe. Neville, on the other hand, had never even heard of the Marauder's Map and was confused about what he was looking at. "Neville, this is a map of Hogwarts that my dad and his friends made when they went to school here. It shows the location of everyone in the castle." And sure enough, Neville saw a dot with his own name next to it in the library near dots that said 'Harry Potter' and 'Daphne Greengrass'.

"Wow, no wonder you never get caught out in the halls at night." Neville said.

"Well, this is certainly part of that. I'll have to show you the other part later." Harry answered. "Now, where is Moody? His office is next to the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom which is... here. There he is! He's in his office with... Barty Crouch?"

"Who is Barty Crouch?" Neville asked.

"He's the head of the Department of International Magical Cooperation. Percy Weasley works for him and was saying at the Yule Ball that he had been out sick recently. Now I sort of wish that I had been listening to what that brown noser was saying about his boss. I wonder what he is doing in Moody's office." Harry said, the curiosity plainly evident in his voice.

"Years ago he was also head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, so he would have been Professor Moody's boss. That would explain how they know each other, but not why he is in the

castle." Daphne added. She sat back and sighed, angry because she knew she was missing something but had no idea what it was.

"Maybe we should just take a step back from this for a while. It's possible that we are all just letting our imaginations run wild and seeing conspiracy theories where there aren't any. He could just be a nice but odd professor trying to help me out in the tournament because I am from the school he teaches at and he likes me." Harry said uncertainly.

"Perhaps, but do you believe that?" Daphne asked, echoing his earlier question.

"No, I don't." Harry answered, frowning. "I will see you guys later, ok? I need to write a letter to Sirius and see what he thinks about all of this. He'll probably just tell me I'm crazy, but I would still feel better if I brought it up." Harry turned towards Daphne and hugged her, whispering "Good night" to her as he did, then stood and walked out of the library still deep in thought.

Harry felt he was close to uncovering some key fact that kept slipping from his grasp. The idea that one of the greatest Auror's in history wanted to hurt him was ridiculous, but there had to be something going on there. Upon reaching the Owlery, Harry took out a piece of parchment and his quill and wrote a quick note to Sirius about his suspicions. For a long time he held the completed letter, unsure of whether or not he wanted to send it at all. Finally he decided that it couldn't hurt anything and tied the letter the leg of one of the Hogwarts's owls, much to Hedwig's displeasure.

"Sorry girl, you can't send this one. People would notice you." Harry apologized to the snowy owl who turned her head and hooted at him to show her unhappiness. "Take this to Sirius Black, ok?" Harry told the Hogwarts owl which hooted and flew off towards its destination. He gave Hedwig a few treats and stroked her feathers for a while, hoping to cheer her up, before finally leaving the Owlery and going back to his dorm room to think.

The following days Harry patiently waited for a response from Sirius, but it had not yet come. He had no idea where Sirius was currently

hiding, so it was entirely possible that it was just taking the owl a long time to reach him. Harry spent a lot of time puzzling over his entry into the Triwizard tournament and Professor Moody's actions since then. No matter how hard he tried though, he could still not understand what was going on. He briefly considered confronting the Professor about it, but quickly decided that until he could be sure that the tough ex-Auror meant him no harm it would be very unwise to do so. As proud as Harry was about his progress in learning new and powerful magic this year, he knew he stood almost no chance of defeating a man who had put some of the most dangerous wizards of the modern era behind bars.

Harry spent much of his free time in the newly discovered Room of Requirement, which he had still not showed to Hermione or Daphne because they spent their time working on their projects. He had found that the room was incredibly powerful, but did have some limitations. For instance, there was an upper limit on how big the room could become. He had once tried asking for Sirius to be brought to the room but that did not work, instead the room was blank and empty. He could, however, get the room to look like almost anything he wanted. Harry spent a lot of time trying to create a perfect training room, though he found he was constantly coming up with new ideas to improve it.

Eventually the holiday came to an end and classes were set to return. The first morning back Harry accidentally overslept, his body clearly not used to waking up early in the morning for classes. Seeing that he could only make it to his first class on time if he skipped breakfast, Harry groaned in disappointment and began the walk towards the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom. The room was already halfway full when he arrived and Professor Moody was writing notes on the chalkboard. Strangely, he noticed several people watching him as if they were waiting to see what he was going to do. Trying to ignore the stares, Harry sat down at his usual spot and waited for class to begin.

"Harry!" he heard Hermione yell as she walked in the door. She rushed over and sat next to him with a worried expression on her face. "I've been looking for you all morning, were you with Daphne? How is she?"

"Hermione, what are you talking about? No, I haven't seen Daphne. She's not here yet, but class hasn't started so she's probably on her way."

"Then you haven't seen it yet, have you?" Hermione asked, a small shocked expression on her face.

"Seen what?" Harry asked, getting a little frustrated.

"Harry, there's a new article by Rita Skeeter in today's Daily Prophet. She went after Daphne this time and said... well, I think it would be better if you read it. That awful woman." Hermione reluctantly handed him a copy of the Daily Prophet turned to the second page, where the article in question was found:

DAPHNE GREENGRASS'S DEADLY THIRST FOR POWER

by Rita Skeeter

Harry Potter may be in even more danger than we thought. Since last week's article this office has been flooded with letters to the editor demanding that the Ministry of Magic take action to either turn the Boy-Who-Lived back to the light or free him from the nefarious influence of Daphne Greengrass. Several students at Hogwarts have expressed their shock at the unexpected couple and confirmed that the only way the two could have come together is through the use of banned potions or spells. We at the Daily Prophet whole heartedly agree.

The question that must be asked is why? Why has Ms Greengrass taken such blatant action against Mr Potter. Does she and her family plan on using our young hero in some dark and evil ritual? Is it simply a case of a girl's obsession with that which she can not have? Or is it Daphne Greengrass's next step on her long and deadly path towards personal power? I have personally uncovered evidence that this may not be the first time the aspiring Dark Lady has committed unthinkable acts for her own gain.

It is well known that Daphne Greengrass is not only the heiress to her family's fortune but the future head of the Greengrass family. What you may not know is this has not always been the case. The Greengrass line, like many noble pureblood lines, typically passes to the oldest son or if there is no son to the oldest daughter. For the first few years of her life young Daphne was set to inherit everything, but that changed with the birth of her younger brother David Greengrass. One can only imagine the jealousy that must have taken root in the young girl's heart. Tragedy for the Greengrass family struck when young David died in what was at the time deemed an accident when he was only 3 years old.

But, and it truly pains me to have to ask such a question, was it really an accident? Or did a young girl in a fit of jealousy murder her younger brother in order to take back what she believed was rightfully hers? If so, what does that mean for the Boy-Who-Lived? One thing is painfully clear: Harry Potter needs help.

Harry slowly set the paper down. His hands were shaking in anger at the paper and Rita Skeeter, but he also felt incredible sadness for Daphne and her family. In the time it had taken Harry to read the article class had begun. "I never even knew she had a little brother," Harry whispered to Hermione who was seated next to him, "she never brought it up."

"It's probably a very painful memory for her, Harry. I'm not surprised." Hermione answered quietly. Harry nodded and began looking around the class, looking for Daphne but she was not there. With class already started, Harry was trapped. He desperately wanted to go look for her and try and comfort her but knew he would have to wait for class to end. He would probably miss the next one, but he did not really care.

No class had ever passed so slowly for Harry. He found it impossible to listen to Professor Moody talk and when they were assigned a part of the book to read he simply stared at the page for fifteen minutes not reading at all. Harry's initial rage at the article had been overcome by his worry for Daphne. They had known that there would be consequences to their date and ongoing relationship, but he had never expected for her to be attacked in this way. Suddenly, with only

five minutes left in the class, an idea struck him. There was something useful he could be doing! Reaching into his bag he pulled out the Marauder's Map and quietly said the phrase to activate it.

The first place he looked was in the Slytherin dorms, then the Great Hall, then the hospital wing. Each time he was disappointed when he found she was not there. Then inspiration struck him and he looked at the third floor classroom they had been using together for so long. Harry breathed a sigh of relief, he had found her. He guessed she must have been sitting down because her dot had not moved much. Glad he knew where to find her Harry began to put the map up when he found something very odd: Barty Crouch was in the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom with him. Harry looked around for him but only found Professor Moody talking with a few Ravenclaw students about the assignment. Looking back at the map he was further surprised to see that Moody was supposed to be in his office, not the classroom. As his eyes darted back and forth between the professor and the map a startling realization hit him: the man he was looking at was not Professor Moody but Barty Crouch using glamours or polyjuice potion to make him look like Professor Moody.

Harry's mind reeled trying to fit this new piece into the puzzle. Even with this new information everything that had happened still did not make sense. And what should he do about it? Tell Dumbledore? Harry guessed that was a good start. Suddenly the Moody impersonator's magic eye swiveled in its socket and stared directly at him. Harry belatedly realized that he had been staring at the Professor with his mouth open in shock for the last minute or two and attempted in vain to look like he was interested in his book. The next time Harry looked up 'Moody' was facing him, watching his every move with a strange grin. Finally, class ended and everyone got up to leave but 'Moody's' eyes never left him.

"Potter!" the false Moody yelled causing Harry to cringe. "Stay after class." Harry's eyes widened in shock at the request. He looked around the room, seeing with disappointment that Hermione and Neville had already left. Thoughts of finding Daphne were slowly being replaced by a need to be anywhere but here. Harry watched with a sense of dread as the other students left the classroom and he suddenly found himself remembering that the next class wouldn't be

in the room for another hour. Behind him he heard the soft thump of the door closing and then there was silence.

Everyone else had left. Harry was now stuck in the classroom alone with the man he knew was not Mad Eye Moody.

Author's Note:

How's that for a cliffhanger?

Thanks again to all of those who have given me suggestions for the story. Even if I don't use them they are always appreciated. And for those that have asked, no I can never see this becoming a Harry/Daphne/Hermione story. The idea of a three person relationship just makes no sense to me and I would have no idea how to write it. Sorry.

Harry's eyes darted around the room as he tried to consider his options. At the moment, he was in an otherwise empty classroom with who appeared to be Professor Moody but the Marauder's Map insisted was Barty Crouch. He had considered running, but felt certain that if he did Moody/Crouch would know that he suspected something. Harry took a deep breath and tried to calm himself down a little. 'Maybe he doesn't suspect that I know' Harry thought, 'So if I just play along and act dumb maybe I can get out of this in one piece.' All the same, he let his right hand drift down to his pocket where his wand was.

"Well, well, well... what are we going to do now Mr Potter?" the fake Moody asked. The man had been staring at Harry since a few minutes before class ended, and Harry knew without a doubt that his magical eye had not looked away since. 'Moody' was leaning against his desk grinning at him in a way that made Harry very uncomfortable. Moody/Crouch didn't seem to have his wand out, a fact that gave Harry a little comfort.

"I'm not sure I know what you mean, sir." Harry answered, hoping that the man just wanted to talk to him about school or the tournament. Instead, he responded to Harry's statement by beginning to laugh.

"Oh but I think you do Mr Potter, I think you do indeed." the professor replied, still laughing. Harry's hopes for getting out of the situation without a confrontation were rapidly dropping, but he still clung to the belief that his best course of action was to keep pretending to not know what was going on.

"Professor Moody, is this about my homework?" Harry asked. Moody/Crouch shook his head a little, and Harry noticed that the man's wand was now laying on the desk just inches from the impostor's hand. Harry frowned, wondering how he had missed that before.

"You and I both know that it isn't about homework." the grinning professor answered, clearly enjoying the game that they were playing.

"Maybe the tournament then?" Harry suggested, now fairly certain that this would not end well. He was almost positive that he could not beat the real Mad Eye Moody in a fight, but could he beat this impostor? Harry wasn't sure and didn't really look forward to finding out. His best option, he had decided, was to stall as long as possible and hope someone came in the room. Perhaps that would enable him to get out of the classroom, but he suspected that unless it was another professor that any person entering the room might just become another victim.

"Ah yes, the tournament. I do hope you are enjoying yourself in it. After all, I did have to go through quite a bit of trouble to get you in to it." he admitted, his face now taking on a proud look. "Dumbledore thought he was so smart with the Goblet of Fire and his damned enchantments. But he's not as smart as he likes to think he is, is he? After all, I am supposed to be one of his best friends and he doesn't suspect a thing."

"So it was you who put my name in the cup. But why?" Harry asked, careful not to reveal that he knew the man in front of him was not Professor Moody.

"Of course it was. And it is not my or your place to know why the master requests the things he does." Moody/Crouch answered. Harry froze at the man's response, was the 'master' he mentioned Voldemort? And if so why did Voldemort want him in the tournament in the first place?

"Your master?" Harry asked uncertainly, needing to know but fearing the answer.

"The Dark Lord, Mr Potter." Harry gulped and nodded as his fears were confirmed.

"But why Professor Moody? You were an Auror, one of the best." Harry said, still trying to keep the conversation going as long as possible. So far he had not even heard a sound from the other side of the door and he knew that it would be almost an hour until the next class came in. He remembered that the Charms classroom was next door and hoped that maybe someone would accidentally open the

wrong door, but the next round of classes should be starting in the next few minutes so his hopes were quickly diminishing.

"Still playing that game, are you? Drop it. We both know that I am not Alistor Moody." Harry knew that it would be stupid to continue acting like the man in front of him really was Moody, so he merely nodded.

"Fine then, Mr Crouch."

"See now? Isn't that better. I was warned about that bloody map of yours, and when I saw you looking at it during class I knew you had figured out that I am not who I claim to be. I think you might remember who warned me about the map, Wormtail sends his regards." At the mention of the traitor Peter Pettigrew Harry's grip on his wand tightened. Crouch must have seen his hand twitch because in an instant he had his wand in his hand, though he was still not pointing it in Harry's direction.

"But why? You are a respected part of the Ministry, why would you do this?" Harry asked, slowly bringing his wand out of his pocket so he would have it ready in case of an attack. Crouch noticed him doing this, of course, but made no move to stop him.

"I guess I gave you too much credit then. I am not my father, Mr Potter. My name is Barty Crouch Junior." the man who still looked like Professor Moody admitted. Harry had never even heard of Barty Crouch Jr, and the confusion must have been evident in his expression because Crouch Jr began talking again. "I take it you don't know of me then. I was and remain to this day a faithful servant of the Dark Lord. After his disappearance that bastard Karkaroff sold me out to save his own ass and I was thrown in Azkaban by my own father. He will pay for that and his other crimes against me."

"How did you get out?" Harry asked, seeing a good way to keep the man talking.

"My mother convinced my father to sneak me out of Azkaban and let her take my place. After that I was kept as a prisoner in my own home until this summer." Crouch Jr explained. "But now I am free to serve my lord once again, which brings me back to my original

question: What am I going to do with you? Unfortunately the Dark Lord wants you alive, if he did not I would have murdered you the first opportunity I got. And there have been so many good opportunities. Do you know how hard it was for me to restrain myself from casting the killing curse at you when you least suspected it? Or perhaps not to kill you right away, but to make you suffer first? It would have been glorious, but the honor of killing you is not mine. The Dark Lord wishes to do that himself."

"Your 'Dark Lord' is nothing more than a spirit." Harry replied, braver than he actually felt. The class next door had already started by now so the chances that any one would walk through the door were extremely thin.

"Is he now? I would suggest you don't talk about things you obviously know nothing about." As Crouch answered Harry suddenly remembered the dream he had during the summer in which Voldemort had become a hideous but small creature that looked like a deformed baby. He had been surrounded by Wormtail and an unknown man that Harry was beginning to believe was Barty Crouch Jr. It would make sense, although Harry wondered briefly what it meant that he was having accurate visions about Voldemort that he pushed from his mind to focus on the situation at hand.

"Why are you doing this, what is your plan?" Harry demanded as part of his mind was screaming at him that the conversation was nearing its end and he needed to prepare for a fight.

"Neither of us are worthy enough to know the Dark Lord's plans. I suppose I will just have to Obliviate you and continue with our little game. It really is a shame I can't just kill you now. Oh well." Crouch Jr said with an exaggerated look of sadness. For a moment the two stared at each other, not moving, waiting to see what the other would do. The both had their wands in their hands, ready to cast the first spell. In the end it was Barty Crouch Jr who began the battle.

"Obliviate!" the Death Eater yelled as a burst of magic flew at his student. Harry reacted by diving out of the way and landing on the ground hard. Seeing Crouch Jr's foot and stump from under the table,

Harry cast the Jelly Legs curse at him and began rolling under the table away from the professor not even bothering to watch if the spell hit him or not. It must have because he heard Crouch Jr growl and dispell the curse as Harry continued to try and distance himself from the impostor.

"A lucky shot, Potter. But first year spells aren't going to beat me." Crouch Jr taunted. Harry knew he was right, he was stupid to have used such a simple spell when he knew others that would have caused much more damage. This was not going to be like his mock duels with Daphne where he could get away with using minor spells. If he wanted to make it through this in one piece he was going to have to be more aggressive. Crouch Jr had not moved from his original position by his desk and Harry hoped that he would not know exactly where he was in the room since he was hidden under the tables.

"Come out now and this will be a lot easier on you." Crouch Jr advised. "Otherwise I may have to hurt you before Obliviating you."

Harry was kneeling now, ready to jump up and cast a spell. Deciding on the Reducto curse, Harry took a breath and leapt out from behind the table. Unfortunately Crouch Jr had seemed to know exactly where he was and had shouted "Inficio!" before he could even raise his wand. The spell produced a disgusting yellow light which flew towards Harry's head. Desperate to avoid being hit by the curse Harry once again dove to the floor, abandoning his plan to attack Crouch Jr. Behind him, the wall where the spell hit began to bubble and melt as if it had been hit by acid.

"You can't hide from me, Potter!" Crouch Jr continued to mock him. Harry moved to a different spot, still hidden under the tables, and tried the tactic again. Just like before, Crouch Jr seemed to know exactly where he was and sent a curse his way to prevent him from attacking. 'It's like he can see right through the tables.' Harry thought as he dodged the spell. 'Of course! He can see through the tables because of the magic eye!' he realized, figuring out why he was at a disadvantage. He was going to have to change strategies. Harry knew that as soon as Crouch Jr saw him get up he would cast some spell at him, meaning that if he timed it right he could dodge and have

a split second where he could fire a spell and Crouch Jr would be vulnerable.

Harry decided to try his plan and jumped to his feet. As expected Crouch Jr had already fired a spell at him, the same yellow one from last time. Harry turned to the side to avoid the curse and yelled "Accio Magic Eyeball!" Immediately Crouch Jr's magic eyeball and the harness that kept it strapped to his face flew off of him and soared towards Harry. Crouch Jr roared in anger as they eye was ripped from his face. Now, instead of having the advantage he was at a disadvantage because he only had one working eye.

"I will make you suffer for that, boy!" Crouch Jr screamed. Harry kept up the attack, firing off the first spell that came to mind he shouted "Expelliarmus!" but Crouch Jr was able to sidestep the disarming spell and cast a blasting hex at Harry which caught him in the shoulder sending him spinning down to the floor. The shoulder felt sore and Harry knew he would be in pain later but there was no time to think about it now. Harry sent off a Reducto which died harmlessly as Crouch Jr raised a shield to protect himself. Knowing that his spells probably could not break through the older man's shield, Harry yelled "Accio desk!" and the desk that Crouch Jr had been standing in front of quickly slid towards Harry. This tactic caught Crouch Jr off guard and sent him toppling backwards over the desk.

The Death Eater quickly got back on his feet and sent another blasting hex, but at the last moment Harry was able to raise a shield which was just able to stop the spell. The shield did not however have enough power behind it to stop Crouch Jr's follow up spell, a bone breaking curse which hit Harry in the left arm just below the shoulder. Harry screamed in pain as he dropped the shield spell and tried to move towards cover. His left arm now hung uselessly at his side. Harry knew he needed time to catch his breath and grinned as a spell he had learned for the first task but never had to use came to mind.

Crouch Jr was now moving around the room in order to get a better shot at Harry and was completely surprised when he saw the teenager transfigure a chair into a wolf that growled angrily and leapt at him. Before he could defend himself the wolf was on him with its claws and teeth tearing into his flesh. The wolf's teeth were digging

painfully into his shoulder when he managed to cast a severing charm at its head, killing it and forcing it to revert to its previous shape. As he got back to his feet Harry walked towards him and screamed "Bombarda!". The force of the spell hit Crouch Jr in the chest and sent him flying into the wall where the impact broke the wood paneling. Crouch Jr was casting a new spell as soon as he hit the ground. This time Harry raised a shield to block the yellow acid spell which Crouch Jr seemed to be so fond of. The spell struck his shield and fizzled out harmlessly.

Barty Crouch Jr was shocked, he had clearly underestimated the boy and the power he was capable of putting behind his spells. There was no way a fourth year student should be able to shield against his spells, and yet Harry Potter could do it. Growling in pain and frustration, Crouch Jr rose to his feet and yelled "Crucio!" Harry shouted "Protego!" in response, remembering at the last moment that it was not possible to shield against the torture curse but by then it was too late. As the spell hit him Harry felt like every inch of his body was being stabbed by burning knives dipped in poison. His screams of pain echoed loudly through the classroom, bringing a smile of pleasure to Crouch Jr's face. The Death Eater ended the spell long enough to taunt Harry.

"Perhaps I should drive you insane like we did to the Longbottoms. That wouldn't technically be breaking my master's command now would it?" he asked as Harry writhed in pain below him. Crouch Jr laughed and then recast the spell, enjoying the screams of pain he was causing. Neither of them knew that Harry's screams would end up saving him.

Next door Professor Flitwick was teaching Charms to a group of second year Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs. The class was progressing normally until about ten minutes into the class when the professor and all of the students froze at the sound of someone screaming out in pain next door. Without a word to the students Professor Flitwick was out of the room with his wand in hand and racing to the adjacent class. When he threw open the door he was shocked to see one of his colleagues casting the Unforgivable Cruciatus curse on a student.

"Moody! Unhand him!" the small professor yelled, causing Crouch Jr to look up in surprise. When Crouch Jr saw the other professor he knew his plans to simply Obliviate Potter were ruined. Angry that he had been discovered, the Death Eater turned and tried to cast the torture curse on the tiny Charms professor. But what Crouch Jr had forgotten was that despite his small stature Professor Flitwick was a former dueling champion and a wizard that should not ever be underestimated. The incantation had not even finished leaving Crouch Jr's lips when Flitwick began moving with a speed that must have somehow been magically enhanced. The small wizard leapt from table to table, closing the distance between them and dodging every spell that the impostor who still looked like Mad Eye Moody cast. The whole time Professor Flitwick was running, jumping, and dodging curses he kept his wand moving in quick but precise movements silently casting a variety of spells.

Harry's pain had subsided enough for him to look up at the duel that was now going on. Crouch Jr was immediately forced on the defensive by the sheer number of spells being cast by the Charms professor. From his point of view it seemed as though Flitwick was casting one or two spells every second, most of which Crouch Jr was able to raise a shield against but still a few were able to penetrate his defenses. One spell set the impostors pants leg on fire while another caused his face to break out in boils. It seemed that Flitwick's strategy was to cast so many spells that his opponent had no choice but to keep his shield raised, putting him permanently on the defensive. Slowly Crouch Jr's shield was beginning to break under the constant onslaught and he knew that he would have no choice but to flee.

Crouch Jr dropped his shield and began to run towards the exit. While he did he yelled out "Incendio!" several times and was able to start a number of fires as the wooden tables and chairs burned. Flitwick's attention dropped for a second as he began casting Aguamenti, producing huge jets of water that put out the fires. In the short time that took Crouch Jr was out the door and running down the halls towards the exit. Professor Flitwick took a quick glance at Harry who was still lying on the floor groaning in pain but obviously alive before running back out the door. The Charms professor softly cursed as he walked out of the classroom, knowing that the other man had

been able to escape. Looking out the window he could clearly see Professor Moody running towards the edge of the wards and away from Hogwarts. Flitwick decided there was little else that could be done about it now and went back inside to check on Harry.

"Mr Potter, I know you are in a lot of pain right now but I need to know what spells you were hit by." Professor Flitwick said once he had reached Harry, who was now sitting up and leaning against the wall trying to catch his breath.

"Other than the two Crucio's, he hit my shoulder pretty hard with something and caught my arm with a bone breaking hex. That's all." Harry explained. "Professor Flitwick, I know it looked like him but that was not Professor Moody. He said his name was Barty Crouch Jr and he must have been taking Polyjuice Potion to make him look like Moody. The real Moody is up in the office somewhere, probably being kept as a prisoner somehow."

Professor Flitwick's mouth opened in shock at Harry's explanation. He knew that Barty Crouch Jr was supposed to have died years ago in Azkaban, but if he was right then perhaps the real Alastor Moody was in the Defense Against the Dark Arts office and would be able to corroborate the story.

"Can you stand, Harry?" the small professor asked. Harry nodded and slowly got to his feet, shaking a bit as he did. After a few moments he felt confident enough to walk and the two headed towards the office. Once inside they looked around but did not see any sign of Mad Eye Moody. "Step aside, Harry" Flitwick commanded as his eyes fell on a large trunk shoved into the corner. A blue burst of magic lept from Flitwick's wand and the trunk's many locks began to open. As the final lock clicked the lid opened and they both went over to look inside. Harry was surprised to see that the space inside the trunk was huge, many times bigger than it should have been without magic. And laying at the bottom of the trunk was the real Mad Eye Moody. He looked weak and malnourished, but other than that uninjured.

"Filius? Is that you?" the true Moody asked and began to stand up.

"Wonderful to see you again, Alistor" Professor Flitwick answered. "If I lowered a ladder could you climb up?"

"Aye, I believe I could. Just get me out of here."

Professor Flitwick nodded and conjured a long rope ladder. With Harry's help they tied one end to the heavy desk in the middle of the room and threw the other end down inside the trunk. A few minutes and some colorful swearing complaining about only having one good leg later and Moody was out of the trunk and sitting down in an office chair.

"Both of you need to get to the Hospital wing." Flitwick noted while transfiguring a quill into a crutch for Moody to use. "And I'm sure Albus is going to have a load of questions."

"No doubt about that, Filius." Professor Moody agreed. He then nodded in Harry's direction and asked "Why's he here?"

"He was fighting someone Polyjuiced to look like you when I found him. He was being held under the Cruciatus at the time. Harry claims that the man said he was Barty Crouch Jr."

Moody nodded and looked at Harry, evaluating him. "Are you ok, lad?"

"I'll be fine, Professor." Harry assured him. "I landed a few hits on him, too. Your magic eye should still be lying in the classroom somewhere." Moody began to laugh at Harry's response.

"Good job. Let's go get patched up." Moody suggested and the three men began walking towards the infirmary. Professor Flitwick briefly stopped at his classroom to tell the confused students that class was dismissed early and to practice what they had been working on for the next class. Harry was walking a little stiffly, still feeling the effects of being held under the Cruciatus for so long. Professor Moody meanwhile was clearly weak but excited to be able to walk around after being trapped in a trunk for so long. When they finally reached the hospital wing ten minutes later both Madame Pomfrey and Professor Dumbledore were waiting for them.

"It would appear that you three must have quite the story to tell." Professor Dumbledore noted with a small smile. "But first I am sure Madame Pomfrey would like to take a look at you." They all nodded and Harry and Moody were escorted to hospital beds while Professor Flitwick sat down in a chair explaining that he had not been struck by any spells. The healer began with Harry who was obviously still in pain.

"Madame Pomfrey, this isn't going to take long is it?" Harry asked as she began casting diagnostic spells. "I really need to get out of here and go talk to someone." The older witch frowned at her patient's desire to leave.

"Mr Potter you have a broken arm, a separated shoulder, and are still feeling the residual effects of exposure to the Cruciatus curse. Lay back down, you are not going anywhere for at least the next few hours. If your arm is as bad as I think it might be I will have to keep you overnight so we can fix it with Skelegrow." Harry groaned in disappointment that he would be stuck in the hospital, yet again, while he had other things he needed to do. Specifically he meant finding Daphne and making sure she was ok after that horrible article in the Daily Prophet. His only hope now was that she would hear he was hurt and come looking for him.

Harry glanced over to the other occupied bed in the room where Alastor Moody was talking to Professor Dumbledore. He assumed that Moody was explaining what had happened to him and why he spent the last few months locked in a trunk in his office. The twinkle was completely gone from Dumbledore's eyes and he clearly had a look of regret on his face. Eventually their conversation ended and Dumbledore headed over to his bed.

"Harry, do you think you feel up to explaining what happened today?" the Headmaster asked. Harry nodded and began telling him everything, beginning with his suspicions regarding Moody, seeing the wrong name on the Marauder's Map, his conversation with Barty Crouch Jr, and then their duel. The entire time Dumbledore listened silently and nodded in the appropriate places. When Harry's story was over the old Professor sat in his chair stroking his beard and

thinking about what he had heard. "When you are feeling better I would like your permission to view the memory in my pensieve. Do you know what a pensieve is, Harry? No? It is a large bowl in which memories can be magically stored and relived. It helps me to organize my thoughts. You might also like to see a memory I have regarding Barty Crouch Jr's unmasking as a Death Eater and capture."

"I would like that sir, thank you." Harry answered.

"What is on your mind, Harry?" Dumbledore asked. "Surely you aren't blaming yourself for Crouch Jr's escape, are you?" Harry lowered his eyes and nodded a little.

"I almost had him, sir. And then I messed up and forgot you can't block the Cruciatus curse. I knew that, but I didn't react quick enough." Harry explained.

"I am sure you did, Harry. I must say I am extremely pleased at how well you did, better than I could have ever hoped. You must not blame yourself for your hesitation. Conditioning yourself to dodge that curse on instinct takes experience, which you now have. Tell me, do you think that you will hesitate if you are ever in that situation again?"

"No. I think I learned my lesson." Harry answered.

"Exactly. Improvement is often quite painful, a fact the best of wizards learn early. Now I shall leave you to rest, unless there is anything else you require of me." Dumbledore said while rising out of his chair.

"Actually, if you see Daphne Greengrass could you ask her to come visit me? I would really appreciate it." Harry said, trying not to act a little embarrassed at his request.

"Of course, Harry. I have found that good company often helps the healing process." Dumbledore answered with a large knowing smile before turning and walking out the door leaving Harry alone.

Harry used the time to think about all that had happened this morning. He wondered if it would have been better if he had simply run out of

the classroom as soon as Crouch Jr asked him to stay after class but realized that would not have done much good because the impostor has already figured out that he knew something was wrong because of Wormtail's warning about the map. Crouch Jr would have come after him even if he had run, Harry was certain of that. Perhaps it was better to face that challenge head on.

Harry thought he had done OK in the duel; certain he had the advantage until his mistake in dealing with Crouch Jr's Crucio. He knew he would need to work on his spell variety and learning to put more energy behind his shields. Harry realized that the reason his shields dropped so quickly was because he had developed the bad habit of never putting his full strength behind them. He had never needed to when practicing against Daphne. 'I'll do better next time.' Harry vowed to himself.

He also now knew that Voldemort wanted him in the tournament but also wanted to be the one to kill him. The second part he could understand, but why would Voldemort order Crouch Jr to put his name in the Goblet of Fire? If all Voldemort wanted to do was kill him then that just seemed unnecessary. Harry felt as if by answering one question he had only stumbled on to another. He would have to be very careful from now on. Voldemort was still out there and now had at least two Death Eaters helping him. If there was a way for him to regain his body they would find it.

Harry's thoughts were interrupted when he saw the door open suddenly and Daphne rush in. After a quick glance around the room she spotted him and ran over to his bed where Harry sat up to meet her. Harry noticed her red eyes and guessed that she had been crying, although whether it was because of the article in the Daily Prophet attacking her or his current condition he did not know. Once she reached him Daphne wrapped her arms around Harry in a tight hug which he returned as best he could using his one good arm. For a few minutes neither of them spoke, but simply held each other. Both of them silently wished they had been able to do a better job protecting the other. Finally, Harry moved over far enough so that Daphne could sit on the bed with him.

"It's ok, Daphne. I'm going to be fine so don't worry about that. Are you ok?" Harry asked.

"I thought I was having a bad day and then you have to go and get yourself attacked. There are easier ways to make me feel better than just trying to have a worse day than me you know." Daphne said with the beginnings of a smile on her face. "You first, Harry. Tell me everything."

And so Harry did. As he repeated his tale Daphne's mind was in overdrive trying to piece together everything that Barty Crouch Jr had told him. Like Harry, she still could not figure out why the Dark Lord went to the trouble of putting Harry in the tournament to begin with. It just seemed like a pointless addition if the plan was merely to kill him. Daphne wanted to keep discussing it, but Harry had other ideas.

"I've told you my story, now I want to hear about you. Daphne, I'm sorry I got you into all of this. If it weren't for me the Daily Prophet wouldn't be writing those awful things about you and your family."

"It's not your fault, Harry." Daphne reminded him.

"Maybe it is, maybe it isn't. I'm sorry about your brother, I understand why you wouldn't want to talk about it." Harry said, hoping to comfort her a little.

"There's no one else I would rather talk to about it. I was only seven years old when it happened. That morning David, Astoria, and I had been playing in a room on the third floor at our family home. There is this balcony that looked out over the porch and back yard and apparently someone had left the door to the balcony open. David went out on to the balcony and must have been climbing the railing. I didn't see him fall, and neither did Astoria, but we both heard him yell when he went over the top of the guardrails. By the time the healers got there it was too late, there are some things that even magic can't fix." Daphne said softly. At this Harry hugged her a little tighter and waited for her to continue.

"Remember the night we first met? You asked me what I saw in the Mirror of Erised and I wouldn't tell you? I saw my family, just like you

did. I guess that might have been when I started to wonder if we might have more in common than I had thought."

"Thank you for telling me that, Daphne." Harry told her. "And I promise you that we will have our revenge against Rita Skeeter. She is going to wish she had never even heard the names Harry Potter or Daphne Greengrass." Daphne grinned at this and then leaned towards him and kissed him. When she leaned back a few seconds later he had a goofy looking smile on his face that made her laugh a little.

"That's exactly what I was thinking, Harry."

Author's Note:

Every time I thought about how Professor Flitwick would fight all I could think of was the Yoda fights from the Star Wars prequels. I wonder if my inspiration shows. Then again no one has called me out on beginning this in the fourth part of the story and including the words "new hope" in the title so... maybe not.

My take on Harry's strength at this point is that although he is probably now a match for most full grown wizards he is severely lacking in real battle experience. He lost to Crouch Jr not because he was too weak but because he wasn't used to fighting someone using Unforgivable or unblockable curses.

This was a pretty quick chapter but don't expect another until the weekend. Thanks again to everyone who reads and especially to those who comment.

By the next day rumors were swirling about what had happened to Professor Moody. Most seemed to agree that he and Harry Potter had fought each other, but who won and why they were fighting varied from story to story. Harry's insistence that he had been fighting Barty Crouch Jr and not Professor Moody was usually met with confused reactions since no one really had any idea who Barty Crouch Jr was, and the few who did thought he was already dead. For the rest of that week Defense Against the Dark Arts was being taught by Professor Snape, as he had done the previous year during Professor Lupin's absences. This, of course, prompted disappointed groans from three quarters of the school and excited cheers from the rest.

Aurors had come and taken statements from him and Alastor Moody concerning what had happened. They promised to look into it before they left, but a week later the Ministry had done nothing and no mention of it had been made in the Daily Prophet. Obviously, someone was trying to cover up what had happened. The only relevant article that Harry had seen was one announcing that Barty Crouch Sr was giving up his position in the Ministry and retiring. Harry had a strong hunch that Barty Crouch Sr was not going to be heard of again, either because he was in hiding or because his son had murdered him. Once again Harry was frustrated at the wizarding world's corruption and inability to face the truth. He wasn't surprised that no one believed him, he was a future dark lord in their eyes after all, but they had ignored the warnings of Mad Eye Moody. If the Ministry and Prophet wouldn't listen to one of the most respected Aurors ever who would they listen to? 'Maybe it would be better if we got rid of them both and started over.' Harry had thought in his frustration.

Harry had learned that the Greengrass family's first reaction to the articles against Daphne was to buy a significant piece of the newspaper. According to Daphne, they now owned seven percent of the Daily Prophet which was enough to get them never to mention the Greengrasses in a negative light ever again but not enough to have their star writer fired. Rita Skeeter's downfall would not be so easy, it seemed. Daphne's father, Daniel Greengrass, was meanwhile checking up on rumors that Rita Skeeter had a secret and illegal

method of getting stories. No one seemed to be willing to say exactly what it was so far but the angered father was determined to find out.

Dumbledore had assured Harry that he had his own search for Crouch Jr going on, but they had not had any luck tracking him down. Likely, they decided, he was already back with Wormtail and Voldemort wherever they were hiding. And so, since nothing could be done, life returned back to normal. Or as close to normal as it could get.

Harry patiently waited for Charms class to end. Ever since seeing Professor Flitwick duel Barty Crouch Jr he had wanted to talk about it with his professor. Harry was still in awe of the speed and aggressiveness which the small man displayed during the fight and wondered if that was something he could learn. Finally, Professor Flitwick dismissed the class with a note that their essays on the Patronus Charm were due the next period. Harry grinned at that and wondered if he could get extra credit by producing one. As the rest of the class left Harry remained seated and when the room was almost empty he approached the desk where Professor Flitwick was still gathering his things.

"Hi, Professor. Can I talk to you for a minute?" Harry asked.

"Certainly, Harry. How are you feeling?"

"I'm great. It took a few days for the soreness to wear off but I feel normal again now." Harry explained truthfully. One thing he had not known about the Cruciatus curse until he experienced it was that the pain seemed to stay with you even after the spell was lifted. There were potions that could dull the pain, but only time could get rid of it completely.

"Excellent! Now, what can I help you with?" Professor Flitwick asked.

"Well, I've been thinking about the fight with Crouch Jr. I did ok, right up until the Crucio, but when you started fighting he didn't stand a chance. How were you able to move so fast and cast so many spells?"

"Ahh, I see. Harry, my proficiency in dueling is due to a combination of my own natural talents and decades of practice. I am sorry to say that there is no secret trick that will enable you to do it in a short amount of time. But I can help you to get started if you would like." Professor Flitwick offered.

"That would be great!" Harry said enthusiastically. "I'd really like to be able to move as fast as you did."

"That is one thing I can not teach." Flitwick answered. "It is not a spell that makes that possible. It is a natural skill that can be done without a wand, much like Animagus transformations or Metamorphmagus changes. I am what's known as a Curromagus, which is basically a witch or wizard that is able to use magic to boost their natural speed and reflexes. We are quite rare, although not as rare as Metamorphmagi, and a person is either born one or not. There is no way to become one."

"I see." Harry answered, the disappointment clear in his voice. "I guess that means I'm not one."

"It is unlikely, but still possible. The differences usually do not become clear until a wizard is a little older than you are now. I was 16 before I discovered the ability, although even before that I was aware that I had very good reflexes. If I were to suspect that anyone in this school might be a Curromagus I would suspect you, Harry."

"Really? Why?" Harry asked with a look of confusion on his face.

"Mainly because of the way I've seen you act during Quidditch. Your success in that sport is not due solely to your abilities to fly a broom, but in the speed with which you are able to react to Snitch as it changed directions. It is quite impressive, Harry, and one reason among many I wish you had been sorted into Ravenclaw." the small professor explained with a chuckle. "Wait and see, Harry. Perhaps you are a Curromagus, perhaps not. Either way you should remember that there is more to dueling than simply magical power. Honestly speaking, one day you will be a far more powerful wizard than I."

"Do you really think so?" Harry asked uncertainly.

"Of course. You are stronger than most, while I am merely average." Flitwick admitted.

"You have to be better than average, sir. I heard you were a duelling champion, that's far from average."

"Ah but you missed the point, Harry. What I meant was that I am not capable of putting as much power behind my spells as many other wizards are. Because of that it is much wiser for me to avoid spells in a fight rather than trying to shield against them. Due to my size and Curromagus talents I am uniquely capable of doing this." Flitwick explained.

"OK, I think I understand that. But how were you able to cast spells so quickly? Was that just another part of the Curromagus abilities?" Harry asked, surprised to be learning so much.

"Partly, but not completely. I utilize a talent that any witch or wizard can do but only professional duelers ever bother to master. It is a way of linking spells together so that your wand never stops moving. In order to link two spells together the last wand movement of the first spell must be the same as the first wand movement of the second spell. If they are, you can do the movement once when casting one spell right after the other. For instance, what is the last movement in the disarming charm, Expelliarmus?" Flitwick asked, reverting back to his teaching attitude.

"A full clockwise spin." Harry answered confidently.

"Correct! And what spell can you think of that begins with a clockwise spin?"

Harry had to think about that for a few seconds, but finally remembered one. "The body bind curse does."

"An excellent suggestion, and the one I was hoping you would remember. So using one movement but two incantations it is possible to quickly disarm and bind an adversary."

"Wow, that sounds really useful. Why doesn't everyone use that technique?" Harry asked.

"It takes practice to learn the skill well enough to get to the point where the increase in casting speed is noticeable, and most people that aren't professional duelers have no reason to learn it. Beginners often create what are called chains of linked spells and practice the same ones over and over so that they can use them in a duel. The problem with this is that an advanced dueler will see the first spell in the chain and know what is coming after it. Masters of the technique are able to create chains as they cast." Flitwick explained.

"You're a master, aren't you?" Harry asked with a knowing smile on his face.

"I am. And it took me decades to reach this point. If you want to improve you must practice, Harry. I have seen how easy the spells in this class have become for you, so you must be studying ahead of time. Tell me, how far ahead are you?"

"Either finishing sixth year or starting seventh in Charms, Transfiguration, and Defense. I guess I have been practicing almost non-stop since my name came out of the Goblet of Fire." Harry admitted.

"Your dedication shows. If I may make a suggestion though: don't neglect practice on casting speed, accuracy, and curse dodging. They are just as valuable as the number of spells you know and how strong you can cast them." the small professor advised.

"Thank you, Professor Flitwick. You've given me a lot to think about."

"Good luck in the tournament, Harry. I'll be cheering for you."

"Thanks! Bye, Professor." Harry said happily and turned to walk out the door. He had underestimated how much he could learn from his Charms professor and wondered what the other professors could teach him that wasn't normally discussed in class. The ultimate source of information would likely be Professor Dumbledore, but he

always seemed to be busy with something although Harry still didn't know what the Headmaster's job really entailed. Professor Flitwick had given him some good ideas, though. Harry's dedication to improving himself had not wavered. In fact it was stronger now that he had tested himself against Crouch Jr and come up lacking. 'That won't happen again.' Harry thought to himself, strangely hoping for another chance to fight Barty Crouch Jr.

In another part of the castle, Draco Malfoy was plotting his revenge and thinking about his nemesis Harry Potter. He had disliked Potter since the day his offer of friendship had been rejected in favor of the blood-traitor Ron Weasley who Potter apparently wasn't even speaking to now. Over the years he and Potter had fought constantly, causing his dislike of the other boy to grow. This year had by far been the worst of them all.

When the Triwizard Tournament was announced Draco had loudly announced that he would have entered the tournament if it were not for the age line. The other Slytherins had nodded and agreed that he would have easily won it. His interest in the tournament would have ended there if Potter had not found a way to trick the cup and get into the tournament. After that everyone started asking him why he hadn't snuck into the tournament when Potter had been able to. It was yet another humiliation he had to endure at the hands of his rival. Worse than that was when Potter had shown up to the Yule Ball with Daphne Greengrass who was easily the prettiest girl in Slytherin. And as the prettiest Slytherin she was supposed to be his. Draco had approached her several times but been turned down each one. Pansy Parkinson, his date to the Yule Ball, didn't seem to understand why he was so angry when Potter and Greengrass showed up. Draco did not feel the need to explain himself to her.

The final insult had been finding Potter sitting at the Slytherin table and then causing him to get detention. It was all Potter's fault, just like everything bad that happened to him. His dominance in the school should be unchallenged, but Potter had prevented that. And so, Harry Potter would pay the price for his crimes against him. And if he couldn't get to Potter directly, he would have his revenge through Greengrass. She had also shown herself to be a thorn in his side and so deserved it.

'But how should they be punished?' was the question now on Draco's mind which was now drawing a blank. As he struggled to formulate a plan he grew more frustrated and angry, once again blaming everything on Harry Potter. 'You will pay, Potter!' his mind screamed, 'One way or another you will pay.'

Hermione finally found Daphne in the library after looking for her for almost an hour. 'Funny,' Hermione thought, 'that the last place I look for her would be the first place people would look for me.' As Hermione approached she saw that the other girl with a couple of books open writing an essay. Daphne didn't look up until Hermione had sat down at the across the table from her.

"Hermione?" Daphne asked as she noticed her. "Is something wrong?"

"No, nothing's wrong really." Hermione answered, although obviously something was on her mind. "What are you working on?"

"The essay McGonagall assigned about the Third Law of Transfiguration. Looks like I only have four inches left, actually. Is that why you're here?" Daphne asked, still not sure why the other girl was talking to her. Daphne and Hermione had slowly moved from polite to somewhat friendly when interacting with each other during the practice sessions with Harry, however this was the first time that either of them had sought out the other away from that situation.

"No." Hermione answered and then leaned in towards Daphne, speaking softly so as not to be overheard for the next part. "It's about our training with Harry." At this Daphne puts down her quill and looks towards Hermione curiously.

"What about it?"

"I didn't tell Harry because he'd just say I was being ridiculous." Hermione started, seemingly very reluctant to admit whatever it was she was thinking about. "I'm not as strong you two, and I don't think I will ever be able to keep up with either of you." she admitted.

"That's not exactly true, you know." Daphne said thoughtfully. "There are some spells that you can do as good as Harry, maybe even better. You were the first one to pick up on those battlefield healing charms and the best with them."

"Maybe, but all of my attack spells are weak." Hermione said sadly. It was then that Daphne noticed tears in the other girl's eyes just waiting to be shed. "I just want to be able to help out Harry when he needs me, but I feel so useless."

"I know for a fact that Harry does not think you are useless. He depends on you more than you know." Daphne reassured her.

"He did. But not anymore, he depends on you now."

"I guess so, but my relationship with Harry is a lot different than yours." This response finally drew out a small smile from Hermione.

"And what exactly is your relationship with him?" she asked with a little grin.

"Let's stick with talking about you. You know that I am not trying to replace you, or ruin your friendship with him right?" Daphne asked.

"I know that, and I am not really afraid of losing Harry's friendship anymore. We've patched things up well enough. I just want to find a way to make myself useful. Every year Harry manages to get himself into some kind of trouble and most times he has had me and Ron to back him up. But Ron's gone now and Harry's problems seem to be getting bigger and more dangerous. Both of you have improved so quickly, I just wonder if he will even need me around."

"Don't be daft, Granger." Daphne said with a hint of annoyance in her voice. "Surely you didn't miss the lesson where we were told that all witches and wizards seem to have some branches of magic they are better at than others. So battle spells aren't your thing, who cares? Figure out what you're good at and keep trying to improve."

Hermione seemed to think about that for a moment and then gave a little nod in agreement. "I suppose you're right. If nothing else I will be

there to help him research whatever he is going to face. Thanks Daphne, I needed to hear that."

"Sure." Daphne shrugged and then went back to her essay. Hermione recognized that as the end of their conversation and left the table so that Daphne could get back to her essay. Hermione didn't know why she had originally thought it would be a good idea to ask Daphne about her worries but was glad she did. As she walked out of the library Hermione's mind was racing as it tried to think of ways to objectively determine what branches of magic she was best at. Pictures of charts and graphs showing the results of her experiments were already popping up in her head.

Harry sat at the edge of the lake getting ready to begin his first real underwater exploration. After hours upon hours of research he had determined that there was nothing in the lake beyond his capabilities to handle as long as he did not anger the Merpeople village. Merpeople had their own brand of magic that rivaled that of humans. No one was really sure which was better because there had never been a true war between humans and Merpeople. The fact that one lived on land and the other underwater seemed to keep them separate enough to ease any conflicts that might arise.

After casting a warming charm and the bubble head charm Harry dove under the water. He immediately noticed that the bubble head charm seemed to help his visibility underwater a little as if he had been wearing goggles. Still, the visibility was poor towards the shore but as he swam farther out he was relieved to find that it was improving. This part of the lake appeared to be calm and Harry took the time to stop swimming and observe his surroundings.

The lake was far deeper than he had thought it would be. The first fifty feet or so from the shore were shallow but that was followed by a steep drop that led to the main part of the lake. From his vantage point Harry could a large, dark shape gracefully moving in the distance and assumed it was the giant squid. Schools of fish were swimming away from the squid as quickly as they could. The floor of the lake was covered with green plants that swayed in the currents. Elsewhere, Harry could see the ruins of what was once an impressive stone building and he briefly wondered what had happened to it. He

could not see the Merpeople village from here, but guessed that it would be in a deeper part of the lake in the direction the giant squid had come from.

Having no desire to meet the Merpeople yet, Harry began swimming in the opposite direction and continued trying to remember the layout of the lake. It was going to be much more difficult than he had anticipated, he realized, because the lake was far larger than he had assumed. Even if he spent all of his free time in the lake there was no way he could map out all of it by the time of the second task. Perhaps simply exploring the lake was not the solution he had been looking for. Frowning slightly, Harry realized he would have to start thinking of another way to ensure victory in the next round.

For the next hour Harry continued to explore, slowly coming to the realization that he much preferred life on the ground or in the air to that underwater. On the ground he could run and on his broom he could soar through the air at even higher speeds, but under water he was painfully slow. He attempted to use blasting hexes to propel himself forward but all that did was blow a hole in a nearby rock. He made a mental note to look up spells that would help him move underwater and continued on.

Harry was swimming through a deep valley when he noticed group of creatures approaching him. As they got closer he saw that they were Grindylows and there were four of them. The pale green animals have sharp green teeth and horns. Although aggressive on their own, it is as a pack that they become truly dangerous. Four Grindylows should not be ignored, but are not a real threat. That was when Harry noticed that the group of Grindylows in front of him was not his only problem. Four more Grindylows had managed to sneak up on him from behind. Harry cursed, wondering how he had let that happen, and then realized that he could hear very little of what was going on underwater. A fact that was probably made worse by the bubble head charm he was using. 'There's another reason to use the gillyweed in the tournament' Harry thought as he drew his wand and prepared to fight off the underwater beasts.

"Relashio!" Harry called, sending the revulsion jinx at the group in front of him. One of the books he had read recommended the jinx

when fighting Grindylows but he was disappointed to see that the spell merely knocked them back a few feet and made them angry. Groaning at his spell's failure, Harry turned and sent a powerful banishing charm at the group behind him which knocked them back far enough so that he would have time to take on the first group. Those four angry Grindylows were rapidly advancing.

"Defodio!" he said, pointing his wand at one of the Grindylows. He wasn't quite sure what the gouging curse would do to a Grindylow and cast it more out of curiosity than anything else. He was quite surprised to see a large chunk of the creature's chest fall off its body as it briefly screamed before dying. 'That was a little disgusting...' Harry thought as he prepared to cast the next spell. A quick wave of the wand and a yell of "Diffindo" was enough to sever the head of another Grindylow leaving only six of them left.

Sensing that the other group of Grindylows had recovered from his banishing charm, Harry turned and cast "Expulso!" The explosion curse was surprisingly effective, taking out two of the Grindylows and injuring a third. The other Grindylow in the group seemed to realize that the battle had been lost and fled, taking along its injured fellow attacker with it. Harry returned his focus on the last two Grindylows to see that they were surprisingly close. Harry summoned a rock towards him and then banished it at the vicious little creatures head, knocking it out or killing it (Harry wasn't sure), as its friend reached Harry and bit into his ankle. Harry screamed in pain and then sent a "Reducto" at the animal which hit it in the chest with enough power to disintegrate almost half of its body.

As Harry cast a healing charm on his ankles he looked around the valley, surveying the damage he had caused. Pieces of the Grindylows were still floating everywhere and the water was pink with their blood. It was enough to make Harry feel a bit nauseous. All in all he had done well getting out of what was basically an ambush with only a few little bite marks. Even his spell variety was better than it had been against Barty Crouch Jr. Of course he had not been frightened today like he had been against the Death Eater, but perhaps it was also a sign that he was getting more and more used to fighting. He also felt a little more confident about the second task, knowing that a pack of angry Grindylows was one of the most

dangerous things that a wizard could expect to find in the lake. 'I've had a productive day.' Harry thought as he began swimming to the surface, happy with the day's events.

Daphne found Harry shortly after he re-entered the castle from his trip to the lake. Harry was walking swiftly towards the Gryffindor dorms when she saw him pass by, though he apparently did not notice her. Grinning, she decided that simply calling out his name was too easy of a way to get his attention. When her silent sticking charms hit his shoes and pinned them to the ground Harry's eyes began darting around, looking for danger. By the time he noticed Daphne standing off to the side laughing he had already dispelled the sticking charm.

"Ten points from Slytherin, Ms Greengrass. There is to be no spell casting in the halls, you know that." Harry said playfully.

"Just checking your reflexes, Mr Potter." Daphne answered as she walked towards him and took his arm. They had taken a few steps when she stopped and sniffed the air. "What is that smell? What have you been doing all day?"

"I've been in the lake for the last few hours actually. As for the smell, I suspect it might be Grindylow guts. I was actually on my way to get cleaned up."

"You obviously need it." she replied. "So, how did the first time under the lake go?"

"Pretty good, but I think the gillyweed will definitely be a better solution. I can't hear or smell anything with the bubble head charm, I won't have that problem with gillyweed." Harry answered as they continued walking. "Plus gillyweed is supposed to change your hand and feet to make them better suited for swimming. I am going to have to look for a spell to increase my speed under water if that doesn't work."

"I see. What about mapping out the lake?"

"It's too big. I'll keep going down there and learn the major landmarks, but I won't have time to do more than that. I need figure out where

they are going to hide whatever they take from me." Harry said, still a little frustrated that his original idea didn't work out.

"Or a way to find it..." Daphne said as a thought struck her. "There might be a way to do that, assuming you can figure out what they are going to take. Think about it."

"Alright. Are you still interested in coming with me next time?"

"Yes, assuming I don't end up smelling like you." she answered, smiling. "You need to talk to Hermione."

"Why?" Harry asked, wondering if his friend was in trouble.

"Not my place to say. Just do it." Daphne commanded. Harry nodded, hoping there wasn't a problem.

"I will." Harry promised. "Hey Daphne, next weekend is a Hogsmeade weekend and I was wondering if you would like to go with me."

"A second date then Harry? My, I must have made a good impression." Daphne said while Harry blushed. "Of course I will, Harry. I'd kiss you, but I have no desire to let that smell taint me. Go get cleaned up first."

"Great!" Harry said, now sporting a huge smile. "See you after dinner, ok?"

"Sure, now go. Your stench is making me sick." she joked as they both turned and went their separate ways. Neither of them had noticed Draco Malfoy standing in a nearby doorway listening to their conversation. Nor had they seen him grin as an idea began to form in his mind.

Author's Note:

I've got to say thanks to all of you who have been kind enough to correct my mistakes, whether that is on the spelling of Moody's name or reminding me of the difference between slander and libel. I do appreciate it very much. I hope you keep reading and commenting.

Harry was on his way to Transfigurations class when he was stopped by a nervous looking second year Ravenclaw that he recognized but could not name. The younger boy seemed reluctant to approach Harry for some reason, perhaps he believed that the person in front of him was a future dark lord like the Daily Prophet was so fond of accusing. Once he had turned the letter he was carrying over to Harry the boy ran off as fast as he could, leaving Harry to laugh at his irrational fear. When he opened the letter he was surprised to see that it was from Professor Dumbledore.

Harry,

I was wondering if you might like to stop by my office this evening to discuss recent events. I shall be waiting for you at 8 PM.

Professor Dumbledore

PS: You will find that the gargoyle adores 'everlasting gobstoppers'

Harry chuckled when he heard the clue to the password for Professor Dumbledore's office, it seemed that the old man was developing a taste for muggle sweets. Harry was a bit annoyed that the Headmaster had waited until Friday night to schedule their meeting but realized that it had been a long time since Dumbledore was a teenager and maybe he had just forgotten that most of them have better things to do with their Friday evenings than sit in their professor's office, especially when it was an optional meeting and not for detention. Harry knew he would be going anyway, he just didn't have to be happy about the timing.

Most of the students were headed to their last class of the day, although like on any other Hogsmeade weekend the excitement for the older students was not just due to the fact that there would be no classes the next day but because they would finally have the chance to get out of the castle. Even a castle as big as Hogwarts can get boring after someone has been there long enough. Harry was more excited than most because it would mark his second date with Daphne and he wanted nothing more than for her to have a good time. Luckily for him they were fourth year students and had only been allowed to go to Hogsmeade for two years, officially one for

Harry. Had they been older Harry would have found that he must do much more to impress a girl than simply lunch and shopping in Hogsmeade.

Hours later dinner had ended and it was time for him to meet Dumbledore. His office was located in a wing of the castle that no one usually went down unless they were looking specifically for the Headmaster. There were no other used classrooms or offices nearby either. Harry walked through the silent hall and eventually found the entrance he was looking for.

"Everlasting gobstoppers." Harry said loudly. A moment after he did the gargoyle slowly moved out of the way revealing a staircase that Harry knew led up to Professor Dumbledore's office. As Harry began to walk up the stairs he noticed that he could hear voices coming from the office itself. He stopped, not wanting to intrude on the Professor's meeting, but could still clearly hear the voices.

"Are you certain, Severus?" Harry heard the Headmaster ask.

"Yes. Igor has fled." the voice of Professor Snape said with certainty. "The Durmstrang students are in an uproar. The assistant Headmaster is trying his best to calm them, but with little luck. I believe the Durmstrang delegation will leave Hogwarts within a week."

"I see. Krum must still compete in the tournament of course, although it would be possible for them to arrange an international portkey for him to use. Do you not think that Karkaroff's choice seems premature?"

"Perhaps, but the mark gets clearer with every passing day. The Dark Lord is rising again, but for now all of the other Death Eaters I have questioned have decided to wait and see what happens. I suspect that at the moment he is only receiving help from Peter Pettigrew and Barty Crouch Jr. That makes it the best time to run and hide. Igor may even survive."

"Very good. Continue as you were and we shall discuss this further at a later date. I believe my eight o'clock appointment is here. Come in Harry." Professor Dumbledore called. Harry walked up the last of the

stairs to find Professor Snape almost growling at him, apparently very angry that any of their conversation had been overheard. "Good night, Severus."

The Potions professor gave a stiff nod before turning and exiting the room, never once dropping the angry look on his face. Harry looked back at Professor Dumbledore to find him smiling brightly, as if everything were completely normal.

"I'm sorry, Professor. I didn't want to interrupt you." Harry explained.

"Do not trouble yourself about that, Harry. I assume that you heard Headmaster Karkaroff is no longer at Hogwarts?"

"Yes, sir. Why exactly is he running? Is it from Voldemort or Barty Crouch Jr?"

"Perhaps a bit of both." Dumbledore answered. "You will soon see for yourself why Karkaroff has reason to fear each of them. I would like to show you a memory that would explain the situation and for that we shall use my pensieve. Come, I will show you how it works." Dumbledore led Harry over to a large stone bowl which contained a silvery liquid that moved as if it were alive. Harry started to lean forward to get a better look when Dumbledore placed his hand on his shoulder, holding him back.

"Not yet, Harry. Once I call up the memory we want to see we will both lean forward and be transported into the memory itself. We will be observers only there, not able to affect any of what we see. Now, if you're ready, place your head directly over the bowl." Harry nodded and they both moved closer to the pensieve. For a moment nothing happened, but then Harry felt like he was caught in a whirlwind. The feeling was strangely similar to traveling by portkey, but when the journey was over Harry found himself standing in what appeared to be a court room. Professor Dumbledore was standing beside him, nudging him over to a spot in the room where they would have a better view. Harry smiled when he saw a younger version of Professor Dumbledore chatting with Alastor Moody, the real Alastor Moody that is.

"What is this, sir?" Harry asked as he watched the people hurriedly making their way to their seats.

"This is a memory from shortly after Voldemort's fall. Igor Karkaroff was sentenced to Azkaban for his crimes as a Death Eater. This is a hearing he requested so that he might name fellow Death Eaters in order to gain his own freedom. The proceedings are about to begin, watch." And so Harry did. Karkaroff was brought into the room in a cage, the strange look on his face evidence of exposure to Dementors. He began desperately bartering for his release, although none of the names he suggested seemed to matter to Barty Crouch Sr who was running the hearing. Harry was a little surprised when Karkaroff named Severus Snape as a Death Eater, they had seemed somewhat friendly to each other when he had witnessed them talking at the Yule Ball. Maybe Snape didn't know Karkaroff tried to betray him. Either way Karkaroff's attempt failed when the past version of Professor Dumbledore stood up and argued in Snape's favor that he had turned on Voldemort and become a spy for him before the end of the war. It looked like Karkaroff was going to be sent back to Azkaban when he declared that he had one more name.

"Barty Crouch... JUNIOR!" the Death Eater said dramatically. The court room was suddenly full of excited chatter and Barty Crouch Sr looked as if he had been kicked in the stomach. The crowd in one corner seemed to jump to their feet and a moment later Harry spotted Barty Crouch Jr making his way down the aisle heading for the exit. His escape was thwarted by Mad Eye Moody who knocked him to the ground with a single spell. Crouch Sr was left with no choice but to have his son arrested and sent to Azkaban. It was here that the memory ended and Harry found himself back in Professor Dumbledore's office.

"Well now, what did you think?" Professor Dumbledore asked. Harry still had a thoughtful look on his face, as if he were still considering what he had just seen.

"I guess I see why Crouch was so upset at Karkaroff, and why Karkaroff might want to run." Harry answered. Truthfully, the memory told him very little he didn't already know or suspect but it did confirm some things. "Do you think anyone will find him?"

"Perhaps. Professor Snape was correct: at the moment it is doubtful that anyone who wishes him harm will be looking for him. He should be fine for the foreseeable future." Dumbledore replied calmly as Harry wondered just how long that would be. Unforeseen events had a way of happening pretty consistently. "Now, I would like to see your memory of the fight with Barty Crouch Jr, if that is acceptable. Take your wand and concentrate on pulling the memory out of your head. Then simply place it in the pensieve."

Harry did as the Professor instructed and was surprised to see a silver strand hanging from the end of his wand. Seeing this individual memory Harry realized that Dumbledore's pensieve must contain hundreds of memories. Harry carefully placed the memory into the pensieve and looked up at the Headmaster who smiled and nodded in approval. Soon they were both hunched over the magical device and being sent into Harry's memory.

Harry watched his past self unsuccessfully attempt to talk his way out of the confrontation, all the while silently critiquing his actions. Professor Dumbledore watched the memory much more intently than he had the last one, which Harry thought was normal considering this was his memory and therefore this was the first time Dumbledore had seen it. Harry wasn't particularly happy with his performance in the duel. He had panicked a bit and fallen back on using familiar, less effective spells as a result. Crouch had clearly underestimated him, a fact that may have been the deciding factor in their duel. Next time they faced off Crouch would not underestimate him again, so Harry knew he would have to be prepared. Dumbledore did not seem to share his disappointment, in fact he looked positively delighted when they got to the part where Harry transfigured a chair into a wolf and commanded it to attack Crouch. Neither of them were particularly happy when they saw Crouch cast the Cruciatus curse on him. Soon it was over and Professor Flitwick was rushing into the room to confront the impostor. Upon seeing it again Harry was even more impressed with his Charms professor than he had been before, his speed and technique were truly amazing. The memory continued on until Harry, Moody, and Flitwick reached the infirmary and met Professor Dumbledore. Once done the two spectators were once again sent back to the office.

Upon returning Dumbledore sat down in the chair behind his desk and motioned for Harry to take a seat as well. Harry nodded and sat across the desk from the Professor, waiting for him to voice his thoughts on what he had seen.

"Harry, it is clear that you are unhappy with how you handled yourself in the duel with Barty Crouch Jr. You need not be, you did very well. I am more sure of that now having witnessed the fight than I was when you described it earlier. Your use of transfiguration in a duel was very impressive, a trick that I might have used in your position in fact."

"Thanks, Professor." Harry replied. "I just feel like I could have done better, that's all."

"There is no doubt in my mind that you will continue to improve yourself, Harry. You have developed a surprising drive to do that this year, perhaps a positive outcome from your unfortunate participation in the Triwizard Tournament. If you ever need my help the door will be open for you." Dumbledore said to reassure him. Harry nodded and offered a small smile in response. "There is however, one more issue I wished to discuss with you this evening." Harry looked up sharply at this, from the sound of Dumbledore's voice it was not going to be something that would make him happy.

"What is it, sir?" Harry asked.

"The Minister of Magic has reacted as we expected to the news that Barty Crouch Jr is alive and free, which is to say quite poorly. Word is starting to trickle out about the event, despite Fudge's best efforts to prevent it. Minister Fudge has decided to increase security in what he has deemed high risk locations." Dumbledore answered.

"So what exactly does that mean?"

"He has no authority over Hogwarts, so no changes will be seen here. More Aurors will patrol Diagon Alley and a much smaller contingent will be placed in Hogsmeade. It is the patrol around Hogsmeade that I wished to warn you about, however."

"It's Dementors, isn't it?" Harry asked. "Fudge is sending Dementors to Hogsmeade."

"Correct, Harry." Dumbledore answered with a hint of frustration in his voice. "They will not be in the town itself, but stationed on the outskirts. I advise you to stay away from them if at all possible. The Ministry's control over those vile creatures is not at all assured. A change is coming, the animals in the forest can sense it on instinct. I believe the Dementors know it as well."

"Is Hogsmeade safe, sir?" Harry asked, still in shock that Fudge would endanger students with Dementors again.

"Most likely, although I would ask you not to stray from the village itself. I know you can cast a Patronus, but do not go looking for trouble."

"I understand." Harry said with a nod.

"Good. In that case I shall bid you good night Harry. Thank you for allowing me to view your memory, it was quite enlightening." Harry nodded and left the office headed for the Gryffindor dorms. He considered the danger that he could be facing in Hogsmeade the next day, but quickly realized that he would be less at risk than anyone else, especially since he would be with Daphne who could also cast the Patronus charm successfully. Harry frowned, realizing that he had not thought to teach the spell to Hermione and that there would not be time to do it before tomorrow. She, like the rest of the students, would just have to stay close to the village.

In the back of Harry's mind he was beginning to get the feeling of impending danger again. It was a strange sense of worry that seemed to always be there, but became more intense when he was going to be put in a life threatening situation. Perhaps that little feeling was the full extent of his abilities as a seer, but it was nice to have. It was awakening now, telling him to be careful. Though with Dementors on the loose, he already had that part figured out.

Harry met Daphne at the large entrance doors to Hogwarts shortly after 11 AM. The town had been open for a few hours before that but

both of them agreed that the idea of sleeping in sounded more appealing. They did not appear to be the only ones leaving late, apparently the idea of getting out of bed to walk around outside was not popular on this cold February morning.

"Hey, you ready to go?" Harry asked as he walked up to meet Daphne.

"Sure, there is another carriage leaving in a few minutes. Let's go." she answered and they headed towards a waiting carriage. Harry reached out and took Daphne's hand and was rewarded with a smile in response. The carriage ride was fairly short due to the closeness of the village to the castle, but Harry still enjoyed the time he had to sit in peaceful quiet with Daphne and watch as the familiar scenery rolled by. Soon the journey was over and they had arrived at Hogsmeade. On weekends when the students were allowed to visit it almost seemed like there were more students there than residents, and that was the case today. Although the crowds had not yet reached their full size a large number of students could be seen happily walking from shop to shop and enjoying the day.

Dumbledore's warning had caused Harry to be more alert than he might otherwise be. He had not seen any Dementors on the way over and assumed that they were being kept away from the well used roads and paths. That was a small comfort to him, perhaps if he were lucky he could avoid them completely. He hoped for desperately for that because he hated the way the creatures made him feel.

"Harry, look. Aurors." Daphne said, interrupting his thoughts. Daphne was pointing to a pair of people in blue Auror's robes. One was a large and intimidating black man who seemed to radiate a feeling of strength and experience. His partner was a younger girl, clearly in her early twenties, with wild pink hair and a large grin on her face. She seemed to be joking with the other Auror, although he wasn't laughing like she was. Harry had told Daphne all about his conversation with Dumbledore and she had merely frowned at the news that Hogsmeade would be host to Aurors and Dementors. She had worked regularly on her Patronus charm since Harry taught it to her and now felt confident in her ability to use it, however that ability had never been tested against an actual Dementor. Harry had toyed

with the idea of bringing in a boggart for her to practice against but quickly realized that the plan had several problems with it. First, he had no idea where he would find one. And more importantly, Harry had a strong suspicion that the next time he faced a boggart it would not turn into a Dementor. His fear of them had greatly lessened after his encounter at the end of third year and he was in no hurry to see what would replace them as his top fear.

"I wonder how many of them are here." Harry replied. So far those two were the only ones that were visible, although he suspected that there were more waiting in less obvious places. "How about Honeyduke's first?" he asked, bringing her attention back to more entertaining topics.

"Now that you mention it, I could use some more sugar quills." Daphne agreed and they began walking towards the candy shop. For the next hour they visited the various shops in the small village, sometimes making purchases but more often just browsing. They both felt that they had spent too much time in the castle and were enjoying the chance to do something different. They were in Zonko's Joke Shop when Harry noticed someone sneaking up behind them. Harry spun around with his wand ready, only to find Fred and George Weasley laughing at his reaction.

"Careful there, Fred!" the twin that must have been George said. "Dark Lord Potter almost blasted your head off."

"Too true, my handsome brother. And a lovely head it is." Fred agreed. Harry had lowered his wand and was now looking at the twins in amusement.

"Hey guys." Harry said.

"A good afternoon to you." Fred replied.

"And to you, our dear Dark Lady." George added, after which both twins bowed theatrically.

"It's good to see someone showing me proper respect." Daphne said. "I suppose I might forgive you for sneaking up on us. Just this once."

"How gracious of you!" Fred answered excitedly. "Now Harry, you aren't seriously considering buying something from this pathetic establishment are you?"

"Why wouldn't I?" Harry asked. "I thought you two loved this place." The twins shared a glance between themselves and then leaned forward, as if to tell Harry and Daphne a secret.

"We're going to put this place out of business one day." George claimed with a large smile on his face. "Take one of these. We call it a Canary Cream. Normally I'd charge you seven sickles, but you get the Dark Lord discount for today." George handed him a small candy that looked like a custard cream.

"What does it do?" Harry asked suspiciously, holding the candy up to his face for a better look.

"Nothing dangerous, we promise." Fred answered. "Just use it wisely, and come see us if you want some more." With that the twins moved on and started talking to another one of Zonko's customers. Harry laughed when he realized they were attempting to advertise their line of joke products in their competitor's own store. 'Not a bad way to raise interest.' he finally decided.

"Are you hungry?" Harry asked Daphne as they left the joke shop. "I was thinking we could eat lunch at the Three Broomsticks."

"Oh, and I had my hopes set on Madam Puddifoot's." Daphne replied. Harry looked at her in surprise, not expecting Daphne to want to go to the tea shop he had heard described as 'feminine' at the nicest and 'a version of hell on earth for every male' at the worst.

"Uh, well ok. If that's what you want to do." Harry answered. Daphne responded by starting to laugh as if she had never heard anything funnier.

"No Harry, I don't really want to go. But it's nice that you would follow me into that hellhole if I wanted to go." Harry stared at her for a moment before beginning to chuckle as well, partly from relief that he

didn't have to go to Madam Puddifoot's. "The Three Broomsticks will be great." When they made it to the pub they saw that most, but not all, of the tables were already taken. Harry was able to find one close the bar and they sat down and waited for Madam Rosmerta to come take their orders. Harry and Daphne were enjoying the good food and company when their happiness was interrupted.

"So Potter, taking your tramp out for an evening on the town are you?" the always annoying voice of Draco Malfoy asked. Harry and Daphne turned to see him and Pansy Parkinson approaching their table. Draco stood on one side of the table between Harry and Daphne while Pansy stood at the opposite side.

"Why don't you just leave, Malfoy. I'd prefer not to have to curse you in front of so many witnesses." Harry replied, upset that his date had been disturbed.

"Really? I didn't think you even paid attention to rules or laws, is it just to see how many you've broken? Only an idiot would believe that you have it in you to be a dark lord, but you are a liar and cheat. I'm just glad the rest of the world seems to be coming to their senses." Malfoy responded bitterly.

"Sod off, Draco." Daphne said, breaking in to the conversation. "Besides, we both know you aren't going to do anything here. Tuck your tail between your legs and go home." Malfoy sneered at her, but inwardly was starting to get desperate. His plan called for him to get Harry angry enough to start throwing spells, but so far nothing he said was having the effect he wanted it to.

"Perhaps I won't hex Potter." Malfoy said, still trying to find a way to anger his nemesis. "I'll just take this then, hope you weren't saving it." Malfoy reached towards the table and grabbed the Canary Cream that Harry had set by his plate. A small grin came over Harry's face, wondering if he could get Malfoy to eat it.

"Give it back!" Harry demanded, knowing that the more he seemed to want it the less likely Malfoy was to give it back. Malfoy smirked, thinking he was finally starting to get under Harry's skin.

"I don't think I will." Malfoy said as he unwrapped the candy and popped it into his mouth. As soon as he swallowed the candy his eyes bulged and he knew something was terribly wrong. Feathers began sprouting up out of his skin and his nose began growing into the shape of a beak. He tried to yell out but his voice had been replaced by a strange squawking sound. Everyone in the pub turned and started laughing as he slowly turned into a giant canary. In the distraction, Pansy Parkinson saw her chance and removed a small vial from her robes. She placed a few drops of the red liquid it contained into both Harry and Daphne's drinks before hiding the vial. She smiled evilly, the distraction may not have happened as planned but this part still worked. She had completed her task and no one seemed to notice, their attentions were still focused on Malfoy.

The canary effect lasted for a little more than a minute, and when it had finished Malfoy's features had returned to normal and the feathers covering his body had fallen off. The pub's patrons were still laughing hysterically at what they had seen and Malfoy's face grew red in embarrassment and anger.

"This isn't over, Potter. Don't think for a second it is!" Malfoy yelled and turned to leave the pub with Pansy following close behind him.

"Oh Harry, that was priceless! Why couldn't I have brought a camera with me?" Daphne said between laughs. Harry was still trying to control his laughter when he reached for his Butterbeer and took a drink. As the cool liquid went down his throat he felt his mood change and his laughter abruptly died. His amusement was replaced by a strange sense of unspecific anger. Daphne noticed his change in attitude and looked at him curiously.

"Harry? You ok over there?" she asked.

"Of course I'm ok. What the bloody hell do you think?" he snapped back at her angrily. A small voice in his mind was softly asking him what he was so mad about, but it was hard to focus on with so much anger running through his head.

"What's gotten in to you?" Daphne replied, getting a bit upset herself. "One minute you were laughing and the next you're a pissed off jerk."

"I'm a jerk, am I? Well maybe Malfoy was right about you, Greengrass." Harry answered, though the voice inside him questioning his attitude seemed to be getting louder. Daphne looked ready to hex him when her face dropped into an expression of concentration.

"Harry, give me your drink." she commanded.

"Get your own!" he said back, raising his voice even higher. Daphne reached over and took his Butterbeer anyway. She carefully raised the glass to her nose and smelled it, scowling as she set it down. She then picked up her own drink and repeated the process, a strange smell not normally found in Butterbeer was coming from both of them.

"Potter! Get a hold of yourself and settle down." Daphne said forcefully, demanding he comply. "Somehow Malfoy managed to put something in our drinks. From the way you are reacting I would guess it is the Draught of Rage. It makes you angry and prone to violence for about ten minutes. You can fight off the Imperious Curse, you can fight off this!"

Harry wanted to yell at her for telling him to settle down, but the voice in the back of his head was growing louder and agreeing with her assessment. He knew there was no real reason for him to be mad at Daphne. Malfoy though, he was the one that deserved his anger.

"Why? What was he trying to do?" Harry asked, still trying to quell the anger he could still feel boiling beneath the surface.

"He put some in my drink, too. If we had both gotten it in our systems we would probably be cursing each other by now, and then we would be in real trouble. Plans like this have worked before. Remember from History of Magic? Some dark lord snuck the Draught of Rage into his enemy's food supply and just let them kill each other. This could have been very dangerous, Harry." Daphne explained. Harry simply nodded, most of his concentration was still focused on removing the foreign thoughts and feelings from his mind. Slowly, he could feel the anger towards Daphne ebbing away. His anger towards Malfoy, however, was still present.

"Come on." Harry said, rising to his feet. "Let's go find Malfoy." Harry was walking towards the door before Daphne could even begin to protest. Once outside the pub Harry began to look around hoping to spot Malfoy.

"Harry, you're still feeling the effects of the potion." Daphne said as she caught up with him. "Let's go back inside and wait for it to wear off. If you still want to find Draco then I will help you."

"There!" Harry said, pointing towards a tree towards the outskirts of the village. Malfoy, Parkinson, Crabbe, and Goyle were all sitting by the tree watching the Three Broomsticks. Apparently they had been expecting Harry and Daphne to provide entertainment in their potion induced rage. Harry began running towards them with Daphne following close behind. Harry was still quite angry, but he could feel the effects of the potion influencing him less and less with every passing moment. Malfoy and company saw him coming and seemingly thought it would be funny to have him chase them because they had gotten up and started running away from Harry and Daphne.

"Harry, stop!" Daphne yelled. The urgency in her voice caused Harry to drop his pursuit and turn to face her. "There are Dementors that way!" Harry frowned and appeared to think about what she had said. Casting a quick glance towards where Malfoy and his friends had run to Harry closed his eyes and attempted to calm himself. Finally he was certain that the effects of the potion had worn off.

"Then we have to go." Harry answered reluctantly. "None of them can cast a Patronus, we can. As much as I'd like to curse him, I can't just let Malfoy die. Not even he deserves that."

"I've never cast a Patronus against a Dementor. I'm not sure I can." Daphne said softly, the worry clear in her voice. Harry responded by walking over to her and bringing her in to a tight hug. After a few moments, Daphne lifted her arms and returned the hug. She tried her best to ignore her worries and concentrate on the comfort Harry was providing.

"You can do it, Daphne. I know you can." he assured her. She opened her mouth to respond but was stopped when Harry leaned forward and kissed her. The kiss was brief, but somehow Daphne thought it was exactly what she needed. "Let's go." Daphne nodded and together they began running towards where they had last seen the others. Harry worried that he had lost them, a fear that only increased as he felt a cold chill travel down his spine. The Dementors were nearby. He looked towards Daphne to see that her eyes were wide open with a look of shock on them, she could obviously feel the Dementors as well.

As they came over a snowy hill Harry gasped when he saw that the Dementors had Malfoy and his friends surrounded. The four Slytherins were casting a variety of curses at the deadly creatures, but none of them worked. There were six Dementors in total, and at the moment they seemed to be toying with the children. Perhaps they were already enjoying the fear that they were provoking. Even from this distance the Dementors were able to affect Harry strong enough that he could faintly hear his mother's cries for mercy at the hands of Voldemort. 'No!' his mind screamed at him. 'I will not be afraid.' Harry gave Daphne's hand a squeeze in encouragement and they headed towards the group. As they prepared to cast their Patronuses Malfoy and Parkinson decided to run, leaving Crabbe and Goyle behind. Three of the Dementors followed the two students as Harry realized that he and Daphne were both going to have to successfully cast the charm if they were going to be able to save their classmates.

"Expecto Patronum!" Harry and Daphne yelled out simultaneously. Immediately a fully formed stag leapt from Harry's wand and began charging towards the Dementor's surrounding Malfoy and Parkinson. Daphne's fox Patronus took a few seconds longer to form, but eventually did and sped off towards Crabbe and Goyle. Harry began to focus on pouring as much of his magic into the spell as he could, and was surprised to see that his stag was getting larger and larger. He worried that the Patronus would become unstable and forced himself to concentrate on happy thoughts and emotions. In the moment before his stag reached its target Harry glanced over to check on Daphne.

Daphne was fully focused on her spell and had a large, triumphant smile plastered on her face after seeing that she had been able to cast the charm correctly. As her ghost-like fox leaped towards the Dementors she began shouting out, encouraging her Patronus to attack the vile creatures. Seeing her reaction, Harry felt a surge of pride and affection for her. He suddenly realized how lucky he was to have her in his life.

When he turned back only moments later to check on his stag Patronus he saw that it had oddly shrank back to its normal size, but that was not the most striking change. Somehow, the stag appeared more solid and lifelike. When it attacked the Dementors Harry thought he heard them howl in pain and surprise before they began to retreat. The stag briefly stood guard over Malfoy and Parkinson but when it was clear that the Dementors were running away it headed towards Crabbe and Goyle. Daphne's fox had managed to prevent the Dementor's from getting close to Crabbe and Goyle, but was not able to chase them away like Harry's stag had been. As the stag charged towards the group two of the Dementors fled like the others, but one seemed to have been caught by surprise and turned to find itself impaled on the Patronus's antlers. Once again the strange howl of pain and shock filled the clearing as the Dementor attempted to escape. But this time, the creature was caught on the antlers and unable to free itself. The howls continued for a few moments before all noise stopped and the Dementor dropped to the ground completely still. The black fog that seemed to surround the beast began to dissipate along with the feelings of fear the Dementors were capable of producing.

"Is it dead?" Daphne asked in disbelief. She had never heard of anyone being able to hurt a Dementor, let alone kill one.

"I'm not sure, but I think it is." Harry answered. He then held his wand in the air and said "Periculum!", which caused red sparks to shoot in to the air from the tip of his wand. Harry hoped that a professor or the Aurors would see the sparks and come help them. Harry and Daphne first walked towards Malfoy and Parkinson, who were both sitting on the ground huddled together. Harry reached into his pocket and took out some chocolate he had bought at Honeyduke's earlier in the day.

"Here, eat this. It's just chocolate, but it helps." Harry explained as he gave a piece to each of them. They took the candy gratefully and began eating it as the feeling of dread seemed to loosen its grip on them.

"Potter. You saved my life." Malfoy said. It was phrased as a statement of fact, one that he seemed to be surprised by. And it was true, he would have received the Dementor's kiss if Harry and Daphne had not intervened.

"I guess I did." Harry answered with a shrug. He wondered if this would change things between them, but doubted it would. Malfoy had invested a lot in this childish rivalry and was unlikely to just let it go. He was a lot like his head of house Professor Snape in that respect. Harry and Daphne turned and walked to where Crabbe and Goyle were laying on the ground in the fetal position. They both appeared to be crying. Malfoy and Parkinson had gotten up and followed them over. They said nothing about their friends reaction to the Dementors because they knew exactly what it was like. After convincing the two scared boys to eat the chocolate Harry walked over to where the dead Dementor had fallen. Daphne and Malfoy followed, and for a few moments they simply looked at the defeated beast with similar looks of confusion.

"What's going on here?" a feminine voice with a Scottish accent asked loudly. Harry looked up and saw Professor McGonagall jogging towards them with her wand out. The two Aurors he had seen earlier in the day were trailing close behind her. "Has someone been injured?" Harry and Daphne walked towards the group of adults so that they could answer their questions.

"We're ok, Professor. They were attacked by Dementors." Harry answered, pointing towards Malfoy, Parkinson, Crabbe, and Goyle. "Daphne and I saw them heading into the forest and went after them. We were able to drive the Dementors off with Patronus charms."

"Ms Greengrass, I wasn't aware you could perform that spell." Professor McGonagall stated, her curiosity clearly evident.

"Yes, Professor. Harry taught me how." Daphne said proudly.

"Kingsley! You need to see this!" Harry turned and saw that the pink haired Auror had found the fallen Dementor. Everyone took that as a cue to gather around the creature. "It's dead, sir."

"Dead? Are you certain? I did not think that was possible." the other Auror, apparently named Kingsley, answered. "Who did this?"

"I did sir." Harry answered. "I wasn't really trying to kill it, it just sort of happened." The two Aurors and Professor McGonagall looked at him in shock, wondering how he was capable of such an unprecedented feat.

"We must discuss this with Professor Dumbledore." McGonagall said to the two Aurors who nodded in agreement. "If it is possible to destroy the Dementors the Order must learn how." The adults seemed to have forgotten that the students were still there, although Harry wasn't exactly sure what his professor was talking about.

"Professor?" Harry interrupted. "I gave them some chocolate, but I think they are still feeling bad from the Dementors."

"Of course. Why don't all of you head back to the castle. Harry, we will have to discuss this later." McGonagall answered.

"Am I in trouble?" Harry asked with a hint of surprise in his voice.

"Absolutely not!" she replied. "Now, please escort them back. We will take care of this... mess." As she said the last part she cast a glance at the remains of the Dementor. Honestly she wasn't sure what to do other than contact Professor Dumbledore. It was at times like this when she was secretly glad she was not in charge. Harry nodded and took Daphne's hand. Together they began walking towards the village with Malfoy and his friends following close behind.

"You did great out there." Harry told Daphne as they neared the village.

"Thanks to you." she reminded him. "And I think you did a little better than I did." Harry shrugged, not sure what to think of the dead Dementor.

"I'm sorry our date fell apart like that." Harry said, hoping she wouldn't be too disappointed.

"What are you talking about? I had more fun today than I have had in ages! I just hope you can come up with something to top it for our third date." she answered with a grin as Harry sighed in relief. "Besides, the day isn't over. I am sure we can find some more trouble to get into."

"It's not going to be normal with you is it?" Harry asked playfully.

"Would you have it any other way?" she replied. Harry shook his head slightly. No, he liked her just the way she was.

Later, he knew, there would be questions. Lots of questions, all about what had happened today. But for now he was able to enjoy a quiet walk with a happy date and at the moment he found that much more important than anything else going on.

Author's Note:

Pretty big chapter here, though I am happy with the way it turned out. I'd love to hear what all of you thought, so please review.

After the events in Hogsmeade, Harry expected his professors and the Aurors to question him later that day. However the interrogation, as he thought of it, did not come when he expected. Instead he simply received a note asking him not to mention the dead Dementor except to his closest friends, a request that came directly from the Ministry of Magic. The Ministry was worried what would happen if the knowledge that the guards of Azkaban were vulnerable became widely known. Harry laughed at the idea that they could keep that information a secret, too many people had seen the corpse of the Dementor for it to be kept quiet now. The foolish idea seemed to him like something Fudge would try. It really was useless, especially since Draco Malfoy was one of the witnesses. It was all but guaranteed that Lucius Malfoy already knew what had happened, and if there was anyone who didn't need to get that information it was him.

Harry did not have to wait long to see Fudge's plan fail. The next day the Daily Prophet published a detailed account of his encounter with the Dementors. The shocking part was that the article was fairly accurate in reporting what happened, although Rita Skeeter's speculation about its significance was skewed (as always) against him. Harry thought she might note that the four students he and Daphne had rescued were the children of Death Eaters but she left that part out, no doubt due to Lucius Malfoy's wealth and political power. Additionally, Skeeter had given him a new title: Lord of the Dementors. According to her, the Dementors had pledged their loyalty to him after seeing one of their own fall in battle.

What most interested Harry was the question of where Rita Skeeter was getting her information. Although most of the time she was just making up lies, on some occasions she knew things she should not have known unless she had been there. Harry suspected that she may have an invisibility cloak much like his and was using it to spy on people. Cloaks like that were good but he did have one advantage on them: the Marauder's Map. Harry knew he would have to consult the map from now on anytime he wanted to be sure he was alone. He wasn't sure what he would do if he did find Skeeter hiding on the school grounds. Although it was against the rules for her to come to Hogwarts uninvited she did not seem to be a threat in the way Barty Crouch Jr had been, so dueling her was probably out of the question.

Besides, killing her would likely cement his reputation as a future dark lord.

Reactions to the article at Hogwarts seemed to be mostly overshadowed by the news that Durmstrang would be leaving after the second task, which would be held as scheduled the following weekend. Rumors abounded that the Durmstrang Headmaster had been kidnapped or murdered and his body thrown to the bottom of the lake. The professors were mostly unable to stop the rumors because even they did not know where Igor Karkaroff was. Even Professor Snape had no proof that the man had not been abducted or killed, he and most of his possessions had just vanished late Thursday evening. A sense of unease was growing amongst the residents of the castle as they all could tell something strange was going on, but none of them could determine what exactly it was.

The following day Harry was eating lunch and describing his encounter with the Dementors to Neville when Professor McGonagall walked up to the Gryffindor table to ask Harry to accompany her to the Transfiguration classroom for a meeting with the Headmaster.

"Sorry Neville, I guess I've got to go. I'll tell you the rest later." Harry said as he stood up from the table and popped the last part of his sandwich in his mouth.

"No big deal, Harry. Like you said the Prophet got most of right anyway." Neville answered with a shrug.

"Follow me, Mr Potter." Professor McGonagall commanded once Harry had gotten his things together. Harry gave Neville a wave good-bye and started walking with his head of house out of the Great Hall and towards the Transfiguration classroom. As they walked Harry wondered what they were expecting of him and hoped they wouldn't be too mad at him when he admitted that he wasn't quite sure how he had killed the Dementor. Once they reached the classroom Professor McGonagall motioned him inside before closing the door behind them. Waiting inside were Professor Flitwick, Professor Dumbledore, and to Harry's surprise Alastor Moody. He was looking much healthier now than when Harry had seen him last.

"Good to see you again Professor Moody." Harry said, smiling at the former Auror.

"You know I was never your Professor, Potter." Moody responded with a grin. "Although I will be, starting tomorrow."

"That's great news!" Harry answered excitedly. "I was getting a bit tired of having Snape teach Potions and Defense Against the Dark Arts." Dumbledore chuckled at Harry's admission while Moody just nodded in agreement. Moody never really trusted Severus Snape, despite Dumbledore's assurances of the man's loyalty. He accepted that Snape had truly turned his back on Lord Voldemort, but a man who could turn on one master could easily turn on another.

"Harry, I have brought my pensieve with me in the hopes that you might allow us to view your memory from yesterday. Would that be acceptable?" Harry nodded and placed his wand on his forehead as he concentrated on the memory he wanted to share. As he slowly pulled the tip of his wand away from his head he was rewarded with the sight of a small silver strand, exactly what he had hoped to see. He placed the strand into the pensieve and waited for his professors to join him. All five people in the room placed their heads over the stone bowl and were instantly drawn into the memory.

Overall, Harry was much happier with his performance yesterday than he had been about his duel with Barty Crouch Jr. Once again he watched as his Patronus grew as he tried to put more power behind it. This time though he noticed that the larger than normal stag almost did break apart. As it grew parts of it bulged and strained as if it were on the verge of popping like some strange balloon. It was not until he looked at Daphne that the form solidified and shrank, becoming more dense in the process. His professors must have found that part particularly funny because when Harry looked at them to judge their reaction they were all either smiling or laughing softly, though Harry had no idea why they were reacting in that way. They all watched in fascination as the stag attacked the Dementor and instead of just driving it off was able to kill it. The memory ended just as he saw his past self send sparks into the air to signal for help.

"Well done, Harry." Professor Flitwick commented once they had exited the pensieve. "And I take it you were the one who taught Ms Greengrass the charm? Excellent!"

"I must say that I am perplexed as to how you were able to accomplish this." Professor Dumbledore admitted. "Many wizards, myself included, can increase the size of our Patronuses but doing so causes them to break apart. You were somehow able to keep yours intact, do you have any idea how that was done?"

"Yes, Professor. I think I figured it out, with Hermione's help that is." Harry explained. "I sort of figured out for myself that the way Professor Lupin taught me the charm wasn't the best way to do it. What memory you focus on isn't important, you have to make yourself feel a positive emotion. The spell works in two parts: your magic creates the mist that actually drives the Dementors away but your emotion contains and shapes the mist. Hermione compared the mist that the spell creates to a gas and the Patronus itself to the vessel that you put the gas into. If you try and force a lot of gas into a weak container then the container will break or leak, but she says that if you have a really strong container and you force a bunch of gas into it you can force the gas to change into a liquid. It didn't make sense to me, but she said she got the idea from muggle chemistry. She thinks that's what I did, except we were using magic and not gas."

"Interesting... I never would have thought to use muggle science to describe magic. Bright girl, Ms Granger, I still think she should have been a Ravenclaw." Professor Flitwick said with a small laugh. "Your method is a bit different from the accepted practice, although it clearly does seem to have an advantage."

"Do you think you could do it again?" Professor Moody asked.

"Maybe." Harry answered after thinking about it for a moment. "I wasn't even really sure what I was doing when it happened the first time."

"Please go ahead and try, Mr Potter." Professor McGonagall suggested.

"OK." Harry took a step away from the professors and began attempting to remember and feel the emotions he had been experiencing when he had cast his last Patronus. His thoughts drifted back to when he had seen Daphne proudly using the spell he had taught her and he focused on that memory. Her eyes had been wide open and he could see that there were still traces of fear in them. Her blonde hair was gently blowing in the cold wind and her mouth was set in a happy but determined grin. Harry thought then, like he had previously, that somehow she was more beautiful than he had ever seen her. Even compared to what she had looked like at the Yule Ball. Feeling that the time was right, Harry shouted "Expecto Patronum!" and watched as his ghostly stag appeared. He continued pouring power into the spell, happy to see that the Patronus was not expanding nor did there appear to be any of the white mist leaking or dissipating.

Harry was surprised to realize that the spell was harder now than it had been the day before, even without the presence of the Dementors. There was no way for him to tell if the Patronus he was creating could kill a Dementor like the previous one had done, but it appeared to be more solid and lifelike than a normal Patronus would. Eventually he decided that he had made the Patronus as strong as he could and concentrated on holding the magic animal together. The stag quickly realized there was no danger in the room and began walking in large circles around the room, still hoping to protect its master. Professor Moody walked up to it and began inspecting the Patronus, his magical eye twitching the entire time.

"Good one, Potter." the new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher commented. "Not as good as the one yesterday, but better than I have ever been able to create." Moody stuck ran his hand along the stag's back and a surprised look immediately came over him. "Odd. It feels... wet."

"Really Alastor?" Dumbledore asked before walking over and repeating Moody's actions. After coming to the same conclusion that Moody had the Headmaster turned towards Harry and said "Marvelous!" Harry nodded and ended the spell, sighing in relief as he did. It took all of his energy and concentration to keep it going for as long as he had and he felt exhausted afterwards. Harry took the

opportunity to sit down as the others discussed the results of their 'test'.

"Filius, you are the charms expert. Can others be taught to do this?" Professor Dumbledore asked. "If so, it would be a powerful tool against Voldemort."

"It's difficult to say, Albus. I fear I could never do it, although if Harry's idea about how the charm works is correct we could all make out Patronuses stronger. I suspect you and Alastor could perform the spell successfully, but I lack the power it appears to require."

"As do I." Professor McGonagall added. Harry listened in silent shock. Two of his professors thought he was stronger than them? Professor Flitwick had told him that one day he would be stronger, but the Charms professor now seemed to think that day had already come.

"Very well. I suggest we continue research on the subject. It has been hundreds of years since the last confirmed killing of a Dementor and many had feared the secret had been lost forever, but I now believe that we have the answer in front of us. How surprising that it is such a small change to what we were already doing." Dumbledore noted. The other professors nodded and Harry got the feeling that the meeting was coming to an end. "Thank you again, Harry. Though you may not yet realize it, you have given us a powerful tool with which to fight back against the darkness. During the last war the Dementors sided with Voldemort and were a constant threat. In battle they could not be defeated, only contained, which meant many of us would have to focus on them and not the Death Eaters. That can now change; we might not even have to kill another Dementor. I suspect they will be more reluctant to become involved if they realize they are in danger."

"Oh. Well then you're welcome, I guess." Harry answered, not really sure what to say to the Headmaster. "If that's all I'll be going. There's less than a week left until the second task after all."

"Another trip to the lake then?" Dumbledore asked with a chuckle.

"I thought you weren't supposed to talk about the tasks with the champions." Harry reminded him, wondering if the Headmaster would let any information he didn't already know slip.

"And I am not. I am merely noting that you have chosen to prepare for the second task by swimming in the lake. A commendable choice, swimming after all is wonderful exercise." Harry frowned; Dumbledore wasn't going to give anything away. He wasn't too disappointed though, he was fairly confident that he had most of the challenge already figured out. The only part he was still unsure about was which of his possessions they would be taking.

"Sure it is." he agreed. "Professor, I know this might seem like an odd question but could you keep me updated on how the research with the Patronus charm is going? I sort of feel like it was mine, and now I am handing it off to someone else."

"Of course, Harry. Now I will let you return to your training for the tournament. You have done very well so far, I am eager to see how you respond to the next task."

"Thanks Professor Dumbledore." Harry said and walked out of the room. Dumbledore was still smiling as he left, but soon after his face changed to one of concentration. Harry was more powerful than he should have been at this point, even with his non-stop training over the past few months. There was another factor at play here, he knew, though he was uncertain what it could be. There were a few dark rituals that could produce similar effects, but only temporarily and not without unpleasant consequences that would have been easily recognizable. Harry Potter was turning out to be full of surprises.

For the first time since he had started exploring the lake, Harry felt free underwater. The gillyweed changed his body in such a way that he felt like he truly belonged there. It was similar to how he felt on a broom soaring through the air. His previous worries about not being able to move fast enough had been completely erased by his first experiment with gillyweed. Now he felt confident he could out swim many of the fish in the lake and avoid most of the aquatic threats he would face instead of having to fight them. Harry was enjoying a

peaceful view of the underwater environment when a sharp pull on his robes got his attention.

He turned to see Daphne staring at him, looking quite angry. Hermione was not far behind and had an equally enraged look on her face. They were both using the bubble head charm and were therefore not capable of keeping up with him. Harry belatedly realized he had been having so much fun swimming he had forgotten to make sure he stayed close by the others. He clasped his hands together in a pleading motion, hoping that Daphne would understand his apology. They had quickly found that communicating verbally underwater was not possible. She did understand what he was trying to do, but turned her head away letting him know she still wasn't happy with him. Harry scratched his chin, showing that he was thinking what to do next. He then acted as if an idea had suddenly occurred to him and dropped down to the lake floor. Once there he gathered up some of the more colorful plants and made an odd bouquet out of them. When he presented it to Daphne she took it and smiled and then hugged him dramatically. Hermione had been watching the entire scene and laughing the entire time, her anger now having faded away.

Harry spent the next half hour showing them around the lake, frequently stopping to point out things he thought were interesting including the ruins he had noticed on the first day and the remains of a shipwreck he had found a week later. He could tell Hermione was eager to stay longer and learn more about the lake but he knew the gillyweed would be wearing off soon and he should return to the surface. He eventually was able to convince them to follow and made it just as the effects of the transformation were beginning to wear off. Once they were out of the water Harry began casting drying and warming charms, much to the relief of Daphne and Hermione.

"So, what do you think?" Harry asked once everyone was comfortable.

"The gillyweed is definitely the better option." Hermione commented.
"It offers superior mobility at the very least."

"You're right, but I can also see and hear much better underwater. And if it wears off early for some reason I always have the bubble head charm to fall back on."

"That settles the question on how you will stay under the lake for an hour, but you still need to a way to find what you are looking for." Daphne reminded him. "I found a spell that might be useful, but only if you know what it is you are looking for."

"Really?" Harry asked, excited that another part of his challenge might have an answer.

"Yeah. It's actually two spells, but they are pretty easy to learn and cast. The book I found it in said it was invented by a wizard who kept losing his wallet, and it is supposed to work on things less than a mile away. It wears off after a few weeks though. The first one is Celario, you use it to mark and name whatever it is you are going to be looking for. Here, let me show you." Daphne said as she walked over and picked up a rock. She waved her wand in a sharp slashing movement before tapping the rock and saying "Celario rock."

"Ok, so what now?" Harry asked, curious to see how the two spells worked together.

"Now you use the second spell. Reperio rock!" Once Daphne cast the spell a faint red line linked the tip of her wand and the spot on the rock she had tapped. Harry looked towards her and then to the rock with an disappointed look on his face.

"No big deal, Daphne. Maybe you just cast it wrong, we'll keep trying." Harry said as if he was trying to cheer her up.

"What are you talking about? It worked. Don't you see the red line?" Daphne asked.

"Red line?" Hermione said sounding quite confused. "What are you talking about? There's no red line."

"Of course!" Daphne exclaimed in realization. "Only the person who cast the spell can see it. That makes the spell even better, this way no one will be able to follow your path."

"Great. Now, can you show me that wand movement again?" Harry asked. For the next ten minutes she showed Harry and Hermione how to cast the spell. Harry was the first to master the spells, as he almost always was, but Hermione was not far behind. After a few tries they had both successfully cast the spell on a number of objects around them. Harry was surprised to see that instead of a red line like Daphne's his had been a bright yellow, almost golden, color. Hermione said that her line was purple.

"I didn't expect them to be different." Daphne said. "But I guess they all work."

"Now I just need to cast the spell on my most important possessions. I'm still not sure what they are going to take though." Harry said with a frustrated sigh.

"What do you have that is most important to you?" Hermione asked, trying to get him to think about it.

"My Firebolt, the invisibility cloak, the Marauder's Map, and my photo album. Those are the only really important things I own. I guess you could count my wand too, but I don't think they would take that from me."

"Maybe they aren't going to take objects." Daphne suggested. "I was thinking they might take a person who is important to you."

"They wouldn't do that, would they? I mean the clue makes it sound like if I can't find what I am looking for in an hour then it is gone forever. They wouldn't put someone in that kind of danger against their will." Harry answered.

"Oh yeah? Look what they've done to you." Daphne pointed out. Harry frowned but nodded in agreement.

"She's right, Harry. I don't think the people running the tournament really care if someone gets hurt." Hermione replied. "That or the clue could just be an exaggeration, maybe if it is a person at the bottom of the lake they will just bring them up after it is over. So I guess you should cast the charm on the person most important to you as well." Harry's eyes immediately darted towards Daphne and he blushed slightly. Daphne noticed and smiled back at him.

"Good idea." Harry said before walking over to Daphne and saying "Celario Daphne" while performing the wand movement. He then cast the second spell to see if it worked, which it did. He felt a bit uncomfortable with this semi-public admission of how much he cared about Daphne, after all they had not really discussed their feelings for each other, but was very relieved when Daphne wrapped her arms around him in a tight hug.

"You're that important to me, too." she whispered as she hugged him, low enough that they both knew Hermione would not be able to hear. Hermione, however, didn't have to hear it to understand the feelings between the couple in front of her. She smiled, happy that Harry had found a little joy in his otherwise crazy life.

"I think you're ready, Harry." Daphne said as she broke the hug. "And with a week to spare this time."

"I must be getting good at this, huh?" Harry replied jokingly. "I wonder if the others are ready." Harry looked over at Hermione when he said this, knowing that she still frequently talked to Viktor Krum.

"Sorry Harry, but I can't say. I don't tell Viktor what you are doing and I won't tell you what he is doing. And since I help you, I don't help him." Hermione said, her voice making it clear that she would not be persuaded.

"I know, I shouldn't have even brought it up." Harry responded. "I guess he doesn't have Karkaroff around to help him anymore either."

"No, but Viktor says that Headmaster Karkaroff was always too busy to help him anyway. I doubt that it is going to make a difference in the tournament." Hermione added with a shrug. "I wouldn't worry much

Harry, I don't think there is anything in that lake that will cause you any real trouble. Just make sure you beat the others."

Harry nodded, knowing that his lead in the tournament was not too big and that he needed to win this event. He had no doubt that the other champions had figured the clue out or been told what it was, the tournament seemed to be rigged to ensure that. Unlike in the last task he didn't have some rare talent that would give him an advantage. This would be a true test of skill and creativity. Harry found that he liked the idea of proving himself to be better than his older competitors. He had not been taken seriously in the tournament even after winning the first event and Harry was ready to change that. Using gillyweed he believed he could make it to from the shore to any point in the lake in less than twenty minutes, so assuming he had guessed correctly that he would be looking for one of his few cherished possessions or Daphne he knew that the task should be fairly easy.

All three of them went inside and separated at this point. Since it was Sunday they all had classes the next day to prepare for. Before he went to bed that night Harry remembered to cast the tracking charm on everything he owned that had any sentimental value to him at all, but through it all he had the strong suspicion that none of the items he was charming would be taken. It would be Daphne, he felt certain of that. And if that was indeed the case, there was no way he was going to let her sit at the bottom of the lake any longer than she had to.

The next week seemed to pass by in a blur to Harry. He had classes and homework and tests but he found he was only able to partially pay attention to them. His friends noticed his single minded concentration, but only Daphne was able to even come close to pulling him out of it. Hermione had never seen her friend this determined before, and she attributed it to his belief that Daphne might be in danger because of this task. She had come to realize that Harry was becoming a powerful wizard, enough so that she almost felt sorry for anyone who would threaten the people he cared about. Their training had been temporarily suspended while he explored the lake in preparation for the tournament, but Hermione knew that he had not been relaxing over the last few weeks. She suspected that he

had been pushing himself harder than ever away from her and Daphne's watchful eyes.

Hermione's suspicion was correct. Harry had returned to his old practice of pushing himself to the brink of exhaustion before finally quitting. Afterwards his body felt like it was on the verge of falling apart, but by the next day his aches and pains had faded and he was ready to do it again. He knew Daphne would worry about what it was doing to him if she knew, but he believed it was helping to make him stronger. And he was willing to make her mad if it meant he could keep her safe. He would stop after the next task, he told himself, and then he and Daphne would figure out just what he was doing differently than everyone else. That or they would figure out how he was different from everyone else, an option that Harry suspected was more likely. By the end of the week spent using his intense training method Harry felt that he had increased his magical power more in those few short days than he had in the months spent using normal training methods. Maybe it was dangerous, but the results spoke for themselves. And because of it, Harry felt ready for the second task. As he lay in bed the night before attempting to sleep, Harry swore that he would shatter the low expectations he knew people had for him.

Author's Note:

Next chapter is the second task. Harry is already much better prepared for it than he was in the books, how do you think he'll do?

Several of you have suggested that Harry and company become Animaguses, but at the moment that isn't in the plans. It just feels so overly done to me. I would much rather come up with new wizarding talents for them to have, such as Flitwick's Curromagus ability. Besides, every time I think about it I have the strong urge to make Harry's Animagus form be ManBearPig. While funny, I don't think that would fit.

When Harry woke up the next morning he was surprised he had slept so well. He had been much more nervous before the first task, which he admitted might make a lot of sense considering nothing in the lake was as dangerous as a nesting dragon trying to protect her eggs. The next task was scheduled to take place at 1:00 PM, so he still had several hours to prepare. The first thing he did was open his trunk and check on his belongings. As he suspected it would be, everything was as he left it the night before. That meant that either no one had come to take something from him yet or that what was going to be taken from him was not an item but a person.

"Reperio Daphne." Harry said, eager to make sure the spell still worked. He had recast it the previous day because he was worried it might wear off. The locating spell was still functioning perfectly, he found, and the bright yellow line coming from his wand was currently pointing towards another part of the castle. Harry suspected it was aimed at the dungeons the Slytherin dorms were located in but could not be certain of that. He ended the spell and decided to start getting ready for the rest of his day. That was when he noticed a small package lying on his dresser. Curious about what it was he tore away the brown paper covering it and found that someone had sent him red and gold, the Gryffindor colors, swimming trunks with a matching shirt that said "POTTER" on the back in large letters. The clothes appeared to be the right size for him and when he picked them up was surprised to feel that they were quite warm. A note was lying at the bottom of the package and Harry picked it up to see who the gift was from.

Harry,

I thought that given your newfound love for swimming you might enjoy some new swim wear. They are enchanted to keep you warm and dry off instantly. I am sure you will find an opportunity to use them soon.

- Professor Albus Dumbledore

Harry smiled and muttered a silent 'thank you' to Professor Dumbledore. He put them on and found that they did indeed fit perfectly. Harry put his school robes on over his swimming clothes

and decided to walk down to the Great Hall and see what was for breakfast. When he got there he immediately saw that the Great Hall was full as if it were a normal school day. He guessed that most people wanted to be up early enough to get good seats for the second event, although he wondered how exciting it was going to be for them to stare at the surface of a lake for an hour. When the other students noticed him walking in every eye turned to look at him and most of the conversations stopped. Harry was used to this kind of reactions so he grinned and shook his head. That was when he heard someone shout "Go Harry!" and some people started clapping for him. Maybe a quarter of the student population seemed to be supporting him, even a few Hufflepuff's were clapping despite the fact that Cedric Diggory was from their house. Harry smiled and waved to everyone for a moment, still a little shocked by what was happening.

'Maybe there is hope for these people after all.' Harry thought as he made his way to the Gryffindor table. He glanced over to the Slytherin table and noticed that Daphne wasn't there. His certainty that he would have to find her at the bottom of the lake increased as he felt anger towards those responsible for the tournament. He never wanted to be in it and he especially never wanted to endanger anyone he cared about. Sighing, he decided that there was nothing he could do about it at the moment and he might as well eat breakfast. He found Neville eating alone and decided to sit with him. They both said a quick hello and then got back to their meals. Harry had heard that it was a bad idea to eat a big meal before swimming, but decided he still had enough time for it to settle and not cause any problems so he ate until he was content.

"Hey Neville, have you seen Hermione?" Harry asked while taking another look down the table to see if she had sat down without him noticing. Most of Gryffindor seemed to be there but his friend was strangely absent.

"No. I haven't seen her all morning, actually." Neville answered. Harry nodded and wondered what she could be up to.

"Lavender!" Harry shouted, trying to get the attention of Hermione's roommate.

"What?" the girl shouted back from the other end of the table. She had been in the middle of a conversation and wasn't happy about being interrupted.

"Do you know where Hermione is?"

"Professor McGonagall came and got her this morning. She didn't say what for." Lavender answered and then turned back to the conversation she was having with Parvati Patil. Harry frowned as he thought about this new piece of information. Then he was struck by the realization that Hermione had been Viktor Krum's date to the Yule Ball. He jumped out of his seat and started looking up and down the Ravenclaw table. Cho Chang was missing as well. He did however see Roger Davies who had been Fleur Delacour's date at the Yule Ball, so that seemed to disprove his idea that the tournament officials had simply taken the people who had gone to the Ball with the champions. Perhaps there was someone else more important to her. In any event there was now no doubt at all that he would be looking for Daphne in the second task.

"Reperio Daphne." Harry said, casting the locating charm. Neville looked at him oddly because from his point of view the spell didn't seem to do anything at all. Harry however saw a golden light extend from his wand out of the Great Hall in the general direction of the lake. He frowned, guessing that meant she and Hermione were both already hidden in the lake. When he cancelled the charm Neville was still staring at him, waiting for him to explain.

"Daphne and Hermione are both at the bottom of the lake. I've got to get Daphne, and Krum has to get Hermione." Harry said.

"Oh. Do you think they are safe down there?"

"Yes, for now at least. But I don't know what's going to happen if we can't get to them in the hour we're going to be given. I'm not going to let either of them get hurt." Harry replied confidently. "I guess I might have to break the rules, but it will be worth it." Neville nodded in agreement and sat back in his chair, thinking about the situation.

"You don't really suppose the professors would let anything hurt them, do you?" Neville asked.

"I'm not sure the professors are in charge of this tournament. It's being run by a branch of the Ministry of Magic, and I don't trust them."

"No reason to, is there?" Neville agreed. "I'm sure you'll do great Harry. I'll be there cheering for you."

"Thanks. I'll see you there ok?" Harry said as he gathered his belongings and left the table. His exit drew far less attention than his entrance, but he did still notice a few people giving him thumbs up or softly booing him depending on their opinion of him. He shrugged off the negative reactions and tried to forget them. There was no way he was ever going to be liked by everyone in the school and he had long ago stopped trying.

As he walked out the door he saw Draco Malfoy with Crabbe and Goyle following close behind him turn the corner on their way to the Great Hall. Harry had not spoken to any of them since the previous weekend, although the thought of having a long and intelligent conversation with either of Malfoy's lackeys almost made him laugh. Harry slowed down as they approached each other, wondering what Malfoy would do.

"Potter." Malfoy said the name with a hint of disgust in his voice, as always. They had all stopped and were now staring each other down in the middle of the hallway. A few people had noticed and were watching, wondering if there was going to be a duel.

"Malfoy." Harry responded. Malfoy stood still and stared at the person who had been his nemesis practically since they met almost four years ago. Then, after a small shake of his head and a frustrated grunt, Malfoy motioned for Crabbe and Goyle to follow him past Harry and in to the Great Hall. Harry watched him go feeling slightly confused. He had expected Malfoy to insult him or at least claim he was going to fail miserably in the second task today but instead he had done nothing. It was quite clear that the Slytherin still harbored an intense dislike for him but at least he was being civil about it. He wondered if the improvement was going to be permanent or just

temporary until the fact that Harry had saved his life became a distant memory. He shrugged and decided to wait and see what would happen. At the moment he had far more important things to worry about.

A few hours later Harry was finally making his way to the staging area for the second task. Neville was walking beside him and wishing him luck, but Harry wasn't really paying attention to what he was saying. All of his attention was focused on getting into the lake and finding Daphne and Hermione. For at least the twentieth time, Harry reached into his pockets to make sure that his gillyweed was there. He had enough left to last for two hours, far more than would be necessary. He had decided to take a smaller portion when he dived in so that he could have some left just in case. His biggest worry was that there would be some unexpected rule or requirement that he had not planned for.

Once they reached the lake shore a boat was waiting to take them to a large viewing platform that had been erected in the middle of the lake. Harry had seen the tournament crew working on it over the past week and had taken it as further proof that interpretation of the clue from the golden egg was correct. He was actually quite happy with the platform because it meant that his starting point would be in the middle of the lake and not on the shoreline. That meant he could easily reach any point in the lake in less than ten minutes, assuming he didn't have any major obstacles to overcome. As it was Harry felt confident in his abilities to handle anything the lake had in it.

As their boat reached the viewing platform Harry saw the other champions had already arrived and were standing in a section that had been roped off to prevent anyone else from entering. Once again Ludo Bagman was there and seemed to be in charge. Bagman spotted him walking towards the group and began waving him over.

"Harry! Wonderful, you're finally here." Bagman said. Harry gave him a fake smile and took the chance to look at his competition. The first and most obvious thing he noticed was that Fleur Delacour looked upset and very nervous. Apparently she had noticed that whoever they took from her was gone and was not at all happy about it. Cedric Diggory just looked confused as if he had no idea what was going on,

Harry guess that he had not heard that Cho was missing. Krum, as always, looked like he couldn't care less what was going on around him.

"Yes sir." Harry answered. "Are we ready to start yet?"

"Almost. Now that you're all here I can explain the rules. This morning something was taken from each of you, something important."

"Where is Gabrielle?" Fleur demanded to know. "If you have hurt her I will ruin you!" Bagman looked uncomfortable with her threats but had no choice but to answer her.

"Well, since Ms Delacour has given the surprise away I suppose it won't hurt to let you all know that a person important to you has been placed at the bottom of the lake. You will have one hour to find them."

"And what happens after the hour is over?" Harry asked, hoping that his fears would be put to rest.

"Let's not worry about that right now, shall we? I'm sure all four of you will do marvelously!" Bagman answered. Meanwhile, Harry's anger was beginning to rise. Bagman's non answer could have meant anything, including that their friends and loved ones were in mortal peril if they were not able to rescue them in the allotted time. The others took Bagman's response no better than he did and he could tell that Fleur was seriously contemplating cursing the man.

"Your hour will start in five minutes. I'll leave you to prepare yourselves. Good luck!" Bagman said as he made a hasty retreat. The four champions lined up at the edge of the platform and waited for the challenge to begin. Unlike last time there was no talking, each of them was fully focused on the challenge ahead. In the background Harry could hear Bagman welcoming everyone to the second task and explaining the rules to them. He ignored it, still angry at Bagman. Perhaps he was just an announcer and not really in charge of the tournament, but Harry still considered him a part of it and therefore someone who deserved his scorn.

"The task will begin in 5... 4..." Harry heard Bagman's voice say loudly.

"3..." He took a small portion of the gillyweed, enough for about twenty to thirty minutes, out of his pocket and put it in his mouth.

"2..." Harry forcefully swallowed the distasteful plant. As it travelled down his throat he felt an odd burning sensation that let him know it was working.

"1..." He could already feel the changes in his body beginning. In a few moments his hands would grow webbing between his fingers, gills would sprout from his neck, his feet would elongate and turn into fins, and many other small changes would occur that would turn him into a perfect swimming machine.

"GO!"

Harry and the other champions all dove into the lake as Bagman's countdown ended. He slowed down and waited for the transformation to complete as he watched the others split up and head in different directions. Cedric and Fleur were both using the bubble head charm while Krum had taken a completely different approach and transformed part of his body into a shark. It was clearly not an animagus transformation but one done with a wand and Harry wondered what negative side effects such a move might also have. A loss of intelligence was almost a given, although for a task as simple as 'Find Hermione' it would probably be adequate.

Once the others were out of sight Harry cast a disillusionment charm on himself, hoping it would help him avoid any underwater threats and prevent his competition from following him. He then cast the tracking charm and was relieved to see the bright golden line once again spring forth from the tip of his wand and point down and eastward towards one of the deeper sections of the lake. He began swimming as fast as his new body would allow towards where the magic was pointing him. Cedric had chosen to search in this direction as well, although it was probably a lucky guess on his part. Harry caught up with and passed the other Hogwarts champion less than a minute later, despite the fact that Cedric had left the starting point

almost thirty seconds before he had. Cedric's head shot up and looked around, but he could not see through Harry's disillusionment charm. Harry smiled as he swam past Cedric and thought about how glad he was to have the gillyweed. Cedric and Fleur had no chance of catching him as long as they used the bubble head charm, although Krum might be able to with his partial transfiguration.

Harry realized a moment too late that he was paying too much attention to following the golden line and not enough to his surroundings when he came over a small underwater hill and found himself face to face with an equally surprised giant squid. The squid's senses were much more adept at finding predators and prey it could not see so it was able to quickly find Harry even through the disillusionment charm. The huge animal began to panic at the sudden perceived threat and thrash its arms about wildly. Harry dodged as fast as he could, but he was not able to completely escape the giant squid in such close quarters. One of its huge arms hit Harry in the side and managed to knock his wand out of his hand and send him flying through the water several feet.

He hit the lake bed with a soft grunt and immediately started looking for his wand. Fortunately the tracking spell was still working and so he knew that it would be found at the nearer end of the golden line. Unfortunately though, his wand was now directly under the giant squid. Knowing he had no choice, Harry swam as quickly as he could towards his dropped wand. The squid sensed him swimming under it and began to sink to the lake floor trying to crush Harry under itself. As Harry reached his wand he knew he could not swim fast enough to avoid the squid so he spun around and yelled "Reducto!" The curse hit one of the squid's many arms and opened a large, bloody gash in it. The squid did not scream in pain but instead quickly retracted its arms and began to slowly move away from Harry, who it now knew was a major threat. Harry began to swim away, eager to put some distance between himself and the squid, as the large animal seemed to think about whether or not to pursue him. To Harry's immense relief the squid slowly began to retreat, allowing him to continue on with the second task.

Harry's tracking charm had ended as soon as he cast another spell, a major flaw with the spell as far as he was concerned, so he recast the

spell and restarted his journey towards Daphne. His violent encounter with the squid had taken less than two minutes, but he was still unhappy with the set back. After few uneventful minutes Harry swam over the edge of an underwater valley and spotted his target. Daphne, along with the other three people taken from the other champions, was tied to the lake floor and surrounded by merpeople. Unsure whether or not they would try and attack him, Harry disabled his disillusionment charm and approached cautiously. As he got closer the merpeople spotted him but made no movement to attack him or stop him, although he found that they were holding spears or tridents.

Once he reached Daphne he saw that she appeared to be unconscious. She did not seem to be breathing and when he put his hand over her heart he could not feel it beating. Knowing that he had reached her well under the hour he had been given, he assumed that she had been placed in some kind of magical stasis. Using a cutting charm he removed the ropes tying Daphne and wrapped one arm around her in order to carry her. He began to swim towards Hermione but a group of the merpeople jumped in his way and began threatening him with their weapons. Harry frowned and guessed that the champions would only be allowed to take one hostage. Harry knew that the other champions still had over fifty minutes to rescue the people that had been taken from them so it was not imperative for him to take them yet. First he needed to get Daphne to safety.

Harry sank to the lake floor and picked up a rock as the merpeople watched on curiously. "Celario rock," he said softly as he cast the first part of the tracking charm on the rock which he then dropped back where he found it. He was fairly certain he could find this spot again without it if he needed to, but having the charm there to help reassured him. He then pulled Daphne close towards him and began to swim towards the surface. Harry was relieved to see that the merpeople seemed happy to let him go. Harry swam up and out of the valley and began to head back towards the viewing platform. He had not gotten very far when he suddenly stopped and began looking around. He had been by this part of the lake before, but this time it seemed different somehow. He didn't have to look for very long before he found what had changed.

About two dozen grindylows had hidden themselves behind plants, under rocks, in the mud on the lake floor, and in various other places in order to set up an ambush. They had clearly seen him approaching but had not yet made their move, choosing to wait until Harry was a little bit closer and it would be harder for him to escape. The creatures were vicious and quite dangerous when they hunted in packs but they did have several weaknesses. One of them was their speed. Harry could easily out swim them when using gillyweed, however that would be much more difficult to do while carrying an unconscious person. He did however have one trick up his sleeve that they would not be expecting. In his preparations Harry had wondered how muggle underwater vessels moved. Most of them used propellers to force the water in one direction and push the ship in the other. Others used jets that did something similar. It seemed obvious to him that if he could find a spell that would do that he could propel himself underwater much faster than he would be able to swim. At first he had considered conjuring or transfiguring something into a propeller but realized actually holding and using it would be difficult. Finally the perfect spell to use had come to him and he was a little shocked by its simplicity.

"Aguamenti!" Harry said, grasping his wand tightly and pointing it behind him. Immediately a strong jet of water began pouring out of his wand, but since it was already underwater the force propelled Harry forwards. That, combined with his fin-like legs that were still kicking as strong as he could, enabled Harry to swim much faster than the grindylows even though he was carrying Daphne. Seeing that their ambush had failed, the grindylows began chasing after him but it soon became clear they were too late. Harry was simply too fast for them. Eventually they returned to their hiding spots and angrily waited for the next opportunity to come around.

It did not take long after that for Harry to reach the surface. As first his head then Daphne's rose out of the water the waiting fans began to clap and cheer loudly. Harry began swimming towards the viewing platform and felt the effects of the gillyweed beginning to wear off. If he had stayed underwater the gillyweed would still be working fine, but the transformation rapidly begins to reverse once the person begins breathing air again. Harry reached the platform just as his body finished transforming back to its normal state.

"And at just over thirteen minutes, our first champion to complete the task is Harry Potter!" Ludo Bagman announced to the excitement of the crowd. Harry was still trying to get Daphne safely on the platform when her eyes opened and she started coughing. Once she was finally on the platform he magically dried and warmed her and pulled her into a hug. She leaned heavily on him, still weak from the effects of the spell that had been used to keep her unconscious.

"It's ok Daphne, I've got you." Harry said, trying to comfort her. "You're safe now." Daphne nodded and laid her head on his shoulder. A member of the tournament crew approached them with a large towel which Harry gratefully took and covered them with.

"What about the others? Hermione is down there." Daphne asked.

"I know. They're still down there. There is still about forty minutes left so hopefully they will be able to make it too." Harry answered.

"You're going back down there, aren't you?"

"If I have to." Harry responded seriously. He didn't really want to, but he was not willing to innocent bystanders get hurt in this stupid tournament. "I need to go talk to Bagman, will you be ok here for a minute?" Daphne nodded her head and reluctantly released her hold on him. Harry smiled and gave her a quick kiss before walking towards Bagman who was still talking to the crowd which was eagerly awaiting the next champion.

"Mr Bagman!" Harry shouted, trying to get the man's attention. The announcer looked Harry's way with a surprised and confused look on his face for a moment, and then broke in to a large smile.

"Well done Harry! I knew you could do it." Bagman said in congratulations.

"Yeah thanks. I need to know what is going to happen if the other champions aren't able to rescue their hostage before the hour is up."

"But you already saved your friend, Harry." Bagman pointed out. "Why don't you just relax and watch the rest of the competition?"

"Because one of my friends is still down there!" Harry yelled angrily. "And if you won't answer me I am going back down there and getting all of them."

"Settle down." Bagman said with a frustrated sigh. "Nothing is going to happen to them, even if the other champions can't reach them in the hour. Did you really think the Ministry of Magic would endanger children like that?"

"Yes, actually. I did." Harry answered and walked away feeling relieved. In Harry's opinion Ludo Bagman was a weak and stupid man, but he wasn't a liar. No one was going to be in life threatening danger in this part of the tournament at least. Once he reached Daphne he sat down beside her and pulled the towel back around them.

"Everything ok?" she asked, guessing from his reaction that it was.

"They'll be safe." Harry replied. Daphne nodded and put her arms back around him as they began to wait for the other champions to make it out of the lake.

"Thank you for coming for me, Harry." Daphne said after a few minutes.

"You weren't ever in any real danger though." Harry responded, still feeling a little angry that the tournament officials had not made that point clear before the second task began.

"True, but you didn't know that." Harry shrugged and thought she was giving him too much credit.

"I won't let you get hurt." he said earnestly. Daphne smiled, knowing he meant it.

"I know. That's one of the things I like about you." Harry grinned in response, happy to hear that she appreciated his concern for her

safety. When he thought about it he realized that he cared a lot for her and not just for her safety.

"Daphne, will you be my girlfriend?" Harry asked uncertainly. He knew it probably wasn't the best time to ask, but he had been struck by the sudden urge to do it and his courageous Gryffindor side wouldn't allow him to back down. Daphne looked surprised by his question but her expression quickly changed to a happy one.

"Yes, Harry. I will. I'm just surprised it took you this long to ask." she answered, playfully teasing him. Harry shrugged and kissed her in response before realizing they were still in a very public place. He blushed slightly and then put his arm around her as they watched the rest of the second task. At halfway through the hour Fleur Delacour was brought back to the surface alone after being attacked by a group of grindylows. Harry thought he could guess exactly where that had happened. The Beauxbatons champion was clearly upset and tried to get back in the lake to rescue her little sister. She only calmed down slightly when informed that Gabrielle would not be harmed and would be returned to her as soon as the task was over.

By the end of the hour neither of the other two champions had returned. The crowd was growing restless as it eagerly waited and an announcement was made that the champions could still complete the tasks for fewer points if they were still able to rescue their hostage. Five minutes after the hour had passed Cedric Diggory finally made it back to the surface with Cho Chang held close to him. The crowd, mostly made up of Hogwarts students, was thrilled that their two champions had done the best. Viktor Krum was only moments behind Cedric but when he reached the surface he seemed quite disappointed in his performance. Despite his anger at himself, Krum was very careful with Hermione. He gently placed her on the platform and did not leave her side until she had woken up. Harry smiled at that as he realized that the large Bulgarian really did care for his friend.

Harry hardly paid attention as Bagman announced the results. He knew the most important part: he had once again come in first and should now be the favorite to win the tournament, just like he had planned. A date for the third and final task was announced, but no

clue was given as to what it would be. Harry held Daphne close to him and found that at the moment he did not care. He had months to worry about the future and at the moment all he wanted to do was celebrate his victory with his friends and new girlfriend.

Author's Note:

Due to the surprisingly positive response to my suggestion after the last chapter that Harry's animagus form should be ManBearPig, I have decided that the sequel to this story will be entitled "Harry Potter and the Vice President" and will feature Harry's attempt to escape from a very confused but obsessed American politician.

I'm super cereal here, people.

The outcome of the second task seemed to put everyone in Hogwarts in a much better mood. Harry, of course, knew that like most of the changes at his school this one was most likely temporary as well but that didn't mean he couldn't enjoy not being an outcast for a few days. Even so, Harry was beginning to get a much better idea of who truly cared about him and who was just doing whatever was popular at that particular point in time. The one person who Harry didn't understand was oddly enough one that until recently had been the easiest to understand: Draco Malfoy. He no longer went out of his way to antagonize Harry, preferring instead to avoid him and pretend he didn't exist. It was another situation Harry was happy to let continue.

Rita Skeeter had continued to write about him, although her favorite topic was no longer calling him a dark lord but claiming that he was angry at Viktor Krum for stealing Hermione away from him. Apparently she had forgotten that Daphne was supposed to be his 'dark lady' even though she was the one who first suggested it. He was getting very tired of dealing with the troublesome reporter but there was, for the moment anyway, little he could do about it. The wizarding world did not have laws against slander or libel. A man who had been insulted was expected to challenge his insulter to a duel and settle the conflict that way. However Harry couldn't do that without looking like a bad guy so instead he was waiting to see what information Daphne's father could come up with to use against Skeeter.

Hermione and Daphne were both eager to restart the training they had temporarily stopped so that Harry could prepare for the second task, but he insisted that he be given time to relax. The stress of the year was finally starting to catch up with him and he needed some way to get past it. It turned out that spending time alone with his new girlfriend was the best therapy he could ask for. They didn't use magic and sometimes they barely even spoke to each other, but her reassuring presence was exactly what he needed. Daphne seemed to realize this and happily complied.

On one such night a few weeks after the second task Harry and Daphne were sitting outside in the shade of a giant oak tree. The winter cold had finally broken, melting the snow that had covered the

grounds and signaling that spring was rapidly approaching. Harry and Daphne were not the only ones taking advantage of the relatively warm weather by coming outside, in fact it seemed like half of the school was somewhere on the grounds happy to finally be outside enjoying a pleasant day. Harry sat on the ground with his back propped against the trunk of the ancient tree while Daphne lay curled against him with her head resting comfortably on his lap. They were watching a group of third years play with a fanged frisbee which snarled and bit at whoever was closest to the amusement of everyone else. The frisbees were technically not allowed at Hogwarts, but Harry had already seen two professors pass by and say nothing about it including Professor Sprout. He guessed they were as happy as the students to be out of the castle.

"Harry." Daphne said softly, trying to get his attention. It was the first either of them had spoken in almost thirty minutes and it took Harry a moment to realize his girlfriend was trying to talk to him.

"Yeah?" he replied, looking down at her. Daphne had turned so that she could get a better look at him.

"What do you think you'll do once we get out of here?" she asked.

"Depends on what you mean by that. Do you mean once we get up from this tree, or once we leave for the summer, or after we graduate?"

"Either of the last two I guess."

"This summer it will be back to the Dursley's, like always." Harry stopped and frowned a little. Daphne knew he did not like his relatives, but she didn't know exactly how horribly they had treated him. It wasn't that he was trying to hide it from her, just the topic always made him uncomfortable. "Hopefully I won't have to stay long, Sirius said he was working on a place for me to stay over the summer. I used to spend part of the summer at the Burrow, that's what the Weasley's call their house, but I guess that probably won't happen this year."

"Ron still hasn't apologized, huh?"

"No. The sad part is that I know he has realized he was wrong to do what he did, he's just too stubborn to admit it. He was a good friend once, before all of this." Harry added sadly.

"Maybe he will come around, maybe not. Most people don't keep the same friends forever you know. They grow apart and become different people. It's not anyone's fault really, it's just the way things happen."

Harry nodded slightly in agreement. "I know, but Ron was the first friend I ever made except for Hagrid. It's hard to just let that go."

"I asked what you were going to do because my father wanted me to invite you to spend part of the summer at our house." Daphne said, smiling at Harry's shocked reaction.

"Is that really a good idea?" Harry asked uncertainly.

"What? Do you not want to see me over the summer? I see how it is, probably have some muggle girl already lined up for a summer fling." Daphne responded, acting like she was hurt.

"No! Nothing like that! I'm just worried your parents won't like me."

"Believe it or not you have already made a good impression, even on Astoria. Don't worry so much about it, just be yourself and you will do fine." she advised. "So is that a yes then?"

"I will try my best, but sometimes what I do over the summer isn't really up to me." Daphne nodded and accepted his answer.

"What about the other part, what you want to do after Hogwarts?" she asked curiously.

"I've never really thought about it honestly. I think I spend too much time just trying to survive to worry about the distant future all the time. Maybe I'll play professional Quidditch. Everyone seems to think that I'm good enough to make it, although after seeing Krum play at the

World Cup last summer I know I'm not anywhere close to as good as he is. The only other thing that interests me is becoming an Auror."

"Really? You want to spend the rest of your life fighting evil wizards?" she asked, surprised by his answer.

"Well you know after you beat your first one you just develop a taste for it." Harry answered jokingly. Daphne swatted at his arm in response. "Seriously though, I think I would be good at it. And it would be nice to help make the world a better place."

"Maybe, but you would be working for the Ministry." Daphne reminded him.

"I hadn't thought about that. I'll just have to hope that by the time I graduate someone has replaced Fudge then. I can't imagine anyone worse. What about you?"

"I'd be happy with a lot of things as long as I am not just sitting at home being a bored housewife. That's what is expected of most pureblood females after all. I guess I will eventually have to take over the responsibilities as the head of the Greengrass family from my father, which mostly means guiding our investments and trying to improve our social and political standing, but hopefully that won't happen for a long time. There is one thing I've thought a lot about..."

"What?"

"My father always talks about how becoming an Unspeakable was the best job he ever had. I've thought about following in his footsteps. Plus there is the mystery surrounding the Unspeakables which I have to admit I find quite attractive." Harry smiled and realized that during the conversation neither of them had brought up the fact that they both believed Voldemort was still alive and would eventually find a way to come back. They would both be involved in that war no matter what else they did, so perhaps their plans would never come true. A war was brewing and there was nothing they could do to stop it.

"Don't think about it, Harry." Daphne said after seeing the expression on his face change. "You've got to have something to fight for. A happy future is a good place to start."

"I think my little vacation is over." Harry said sadly. "It's been nice these past few weeks not worrying about the tournament or forcing myself to train all of the time, but there is too much at stake to keep slacking off."

"I'll be right there with you, and so will Hermione if you let her. She's still desperate to find a way to make herself useful, you need to be a good friend and help her find it." Daphne told him. Harry knew she was right, Hermione was a great friend and he owed her that much.

"Ok. From now on you both start training in the Room of Requirement with me. And... I want to go back to my old training method." Harry added, knowing that Daphne would object. Judging by the frown on her face, she was about to.

"I understand." she finally said to Harry's amazement. "But would you do something for me first? Tell Dumbledore about it before you do. I may not exactly trust the old man but he does know more about magic than just about anyone else. I've never heard of anyone else being able to do what you do, and frankly I'm worried about you."

"Aww, you do care." Harry joked, trying to lighten the mood a little.

"Of course I do. I've put far too much time and effort into you to see you kill yourself with some crazy training routine." she said smiling sweetly back at him.

"Fair enough. I will talk to Professor Dumbledore. Happy?"

"Ecstatic." she answered and brought her head up to kiss him. "I wonder where he's been lately anyhow. He hasn't been at meals all week."

"I'm not sure, but Professor Moody has been gone a lot too." Harry thought about it for a moment and wondered what they could be up to. Dumbledore had mentioned that he had important work to do and that

Sirius was a part of it, but his godfather had not given him any hints about what he was spending his free time doing or even where he was currently living. Wondering if the Headmaster was even in the castle at the moment Harry pulled the Marauder's Map out of his book bag which was lying next to him. After speaking the code phrase to activate it and tapping the map with his wand Harry began looking for the Professor. He was not in his office or anywhere else on the grounds that Harry could see,

"Harry! Look!" Daphne said excitedly and pointed to a part of the map far from where he had been looking, Looking at the point she was drawing his attention to he saw his name and hers together like he expected them to be. That, however, was not what she was pointing at. Not far from their names was one he did not expect: Rita Skeeter.

Harry's head turned towards where he expected her to be but saw nothing, Slowly, hoping she would not see what he was doing, Harry reached for his wand. He tried not to stare at the spot where he knew she was until the moment he knew he was ready.

"Accio invisibility cloak!" Harry said, pointing his wand towards where the map said Rita Skeeter was. But to his surprise, nothing happened. On the map the dot marked Rita Skeeter was making a rapid retreat. He kept looking, but still saw nothing, "Damn! She was here, she had to be, I thought that would work,"

"Harry, I don't think she was using an invisibility cloak..."

"No, she must not be. It wasn't a disillusionment charm either. We would have been able to see it when she moved, What then?" Harry said, mostly thinking to himself.

"I'm not sure, but I think I know." Daphne said, quickly catching Harry's attention. "I thought I saw something flying off where she was supposed to be. Something small, some type of bug maybe." Harry thought about it for a moment, trying to figure out what it meant.

"There's got to be a minimum size on Animagus forms, right?" Harry said eventually.

"Probably, but remember that Pettigrew is a rat. A rat is a lot smaller than a person, so it might be possible. But I know for a fact that Skeeter isn't registered as an Animagus with the Ministry. That's illegal Harry, and punishable with a big fine and possible time in Azkaban. Maybe more depending on if they've used their form to commit crimes."

"This is what we've been looking for Daphne." Harry said with a mischievous grin on his face. "We can take Skeeter down with this."

"That's one way to look at it, but I think she deserves worse than a fine and a few months in Azkaban for what she's done to us. I'll owl my father and let him know what we found. Don't worry Harry, we'll come up with a good punishment. Her days of attacking us are over." Daphne said with a grin. Harry shrugged and agreed, knowing that his girlfriend had a much better imagination than he did when he came to this type of thing. And he wanted only the worst for Rita Skeeter.

It took a few days but Harry was eventually able to schedule a meeting with Dumbledore. They agreed to meet in his office after dinner, but when Harry gave the gargoyle the password and walked up the stairs he found that the door to the office was closed. He listened closely to see if he could hear anything to indicate that Dumbledore was inside but heard nothing, Harry decided to try and open the door to see if it was locked, but when he put his hand on the doorknob he froze and looked at it with a confused look on his face. The doorknob felt different in some indefinable way. It was not hot or cold and it wasn't moving at all but there was something about it that made his fingers tingle when they touched it. The feeling most reminded him of the time when he was much younger and had accidentally touched an electrical cord with some of the protective covering stripped off and had received a brief but painful shock. Unlike that sensation though, this was not painful. Just different.

Harry took his hand off the door and the feeling faded, but when he put his hand back on the door it returned. Still curious about what he was feeling, Harry put his hand on a different spot on the door and found that it felt the same. While he was thinking about what it could be the sensation suddenly stopped and Harry heard the lock on the

door click open. There were also voices inside talking. One was obviously Professor Dumbledore and though the other sounded somewhat familiar he could not place it. A few moment later the door opened revealing Professor Dumbledore.

"Right on time, Harry. I apologize for the delay." the Headmaster said. Harry took a step into the office and saw who Dumbledore had been talking to. It was the large, black Auror that had questioned him after the Dementor incident. Harry thought he had remembered being told that the man was Auror Shacklebolt at some point.

"Thank you again, Albus. I will begin work on the issue we previously discussed at once." Professor Dumbledore nodded and the Auror turned to leave. As he walked past Harry he paused and smiled at the young man. "Mr Potter." he said as a greeting before continuing out the door, shutting it behind him.

"I trust you remember Auror Shacklebolt, Harry?" Professor Dumbledore said while motioning for him to sit down.

"Yes, sir. Why was an Auror here?" Harry asked, wondering if perhaps they had heard news on Barty Crouch Junior.

"Kingsley is an old friend of mine and was here to see me. Unfortunately there is no further news either on the Dementors which you drove off or Barty Crouch Junior." Dumbledore replied. Harry looked up in surprise but then smiled, the Headmaster seemed to know what everyone was thinking.

"I see. Sir, when I tried to open the door earlier I noticed that it felt odd. Whatever was wrong with it went away right before you opened the door though." Harry said, which drew a large smile from Dumbledore.

"Indeed? I'd like to try something, Harry. I am going to cast a spell on this box and I want you to tell me if it feels similar." Harry nodded as Dumbledore pulled out his wand as silently cast a spell on an ornate wooded box that was sitting on his desk. Harry reached out and laid his hand on the box and found that the sensation was very similar but different.

"It's not the same, sir." Harry said as he frowned in frustration. "They're close, but it almost feels like this one is missing something."

"Very well done, Harry!" Dumbledore replied, briefly clapping his hands in congratulations. "What you sensed on the door and what you are now sensing on the box are in fact active spells. You were exactly correct in commenting that they are different because this box only has a locking charm on it while earlier this entire room including the door had both locking and silencing charms."

"This is the first time I've felt something like that. Why?"

"The ability only manifests itself once a wizard begins to grow comfortable with his magic. While all witches and wizards can do this, many never do." Professor Dumbledore explained, though Harry was still confused.

"I'm not sure I understand. I don't think I've ever been uncomfortable with magic." Harry said, still thinking over what the headmaster had told him.

"I believe you, but think back to when you first began your education. Were you not only aware of the magic in and around you while casting spells or seeing magic performed?" Dumbledore asked.

"I guess so. I haven't really thought about it." Harry answered honestly.

"The magic inside of you is always there, not only when you are using it. If you concentrate, you will likely even be able to feel it within you." Dumbledore responded. "From now on I would like you to think about what your magic feels like both when you are casting spells and when you are not. You may also consider what the magic surrounding enchanted objects such as your broom feel like. With practice and experience you will eventually be able to identify which spells have been used merely by the sensations they provoke."

"Really? I'll try and do that." Harry said with an eager nod.

"Now I assume that was not the reason you sought this meeting. How can I help you, Harry?"

"I wanted to ask you about the training I've been doing. According to Daphne, the way I've been doing it isn't exactly normal." Dumbledore smiled, happy that Harry wanted to talk about this subject that he had been considering bringing up for some time. Dumbledore knew that there was something different about Harry and was very interested in finding out what it was.

"I see." Dumbledore answered. "Please Harry, explain what you have been doing to prepare for the tournament."

"Mostly I have just been learning the spells that I would normally learn in my fifth, sixth, and seventh years. That has been good, but it isn't really what I wanted to talk to you about. Some of the times when I'm practicing I will keep casting spells as strong as I can until I can't do any more magic."

"That is not wise, Harry." Professor Dumbledore said, interrupting him. "Doing so could potentially stunt your magical growth. Magical exhaustion can also be painful to recover from and can take up to a week."

"I know, at least that is what the books all said. But when I do it I wake up the next morning feeling just fine." Dumbledore frowned, thinking about what Harry was saying.

"Are you sure you are actually reaching the point of magical exhaustion?"

"Well once I'm done it takes all of my strength to cast even simple spells like Lumos. Is that close enough?" Harry asked.

"Indeed it is." Dumbledore answered. It did sound as if Harry was exhausting himself, but the rest of his story made no sense. Doing so should damage his body, not help strengthen it. "How exactly do you feel after one of these training sessions?"

"Tired and weak mostly. I usually fall asleep right after I'm done. Then the next morning I wake up feeling great with nothing wrong with me other than I'm really hungry. I wouldn't do it at all if it didn't help me get stronger faster than anything else I've ever done. Sir I can do things now that I know I couldn't do at the beginning of the year. Like that Patronus I used, I'm still shocked that I was able to do that. I'm just not sure what to do."

"Please do not do this again until I have the chance to monitor you during such a training session. After that I would like you to spend the night in the infirmary so Madam Pomfrey can ensure that you are not hurting yourself. We can discuss what is happening once we have more information. Is that acceptable?"

"Yes sir," Harry answered at once, It was exactly what he was hoping for. "When can we do that?" Dumbledore chuckled at his eagerness.

"Is this weekend early enough for you?" the Headmaster asked, still smiling,

"That would be great. Thanks again, Professor." Harry said standing up from his chair.

"There was one more thing I wished to ask you Harry. More to satisfy my own curiosity than anything else." Dumbledore said. "Has young Mr Malfoy's behavior concerning you changed since the Dementor attack?" Harry was surprised that Professor Dumbledore knew about that.

"It has actually. He used to try and upset me whenever he could, now he just ignores me. Why do you ask sir?"

"Harry, you must remember that Mr Malfoy has you to thank for saving his life. In pureblood society when a person saves your life you become indebted to them. Magically speaking this does not mean anything, a life debt will not force a person to do anything they do not want to. However, it has long been a tradition for the wizard whose life has been saved to swear an oath pledging to help his rescuer in any way he can. To not do so is considered quite humiliating."

"So what do you think Malfoy did?" Harry asked.

"I am unsure. Draco is quite sensitive when it comes to questions regarding his and his family's honor, however his rivalry with you could prevent it. Perhaps you should ask him yourself." Dumbledore suggested. "Thank you for coming tonight Harry, it has been most enlightening."

"Thanks for helping me, Professor."

"Harry, that is precisely why I am here. Good night." Harry nodded and walked out the door, leaving Professor Dumbledore alone to consider the conversation. While relieved to learn that Harry had not been conducting any dark rituals he was now at a loss to explain what was going on with the young man. Harry Potter was quite the enigma, and Dumbledore knew better than anyone else how important it was to solve that particular riddle. It could mean the future of the wizarding world.

Harry meanwhile was hopeful that he could soon return to the type of training that he was convinced was necessary for him to become strong enough to survive the war he knew was coming. Despite his improvements he knew he was still no match for the stronger, adult wizards that were loyal to Voldemort. Additionally he had very little experience in actual duels. His training for the tournament was good but not for preparing to fight other wizards. Yet he knew his entrance in the tournament was the catalyst for a lot of good changes that had happened since then.

He also wondered what Dumbledore was up to. His frequent trips away from the castle and his secret meetings with Aurors must be connected in some way. He knew from his talks with Daphne that Dumbledore had been Voldemort's chief rival in the first war so perhaps he was already preparing for the next one. Harry wondered if Dumbledore would try and prevent him from fighting when the war did come, but part of him doubted it. After all his parents had joined the war effort right out of school along with Sirius, Remus, and the traitor Pettigrew.

His feeling of impending danger was beginning to bother him again. He knew he still had some time to prepare, but that time was growing short. Voldemort had at least two loyal followers still helping him and yet nobody knew what they were up to. It was frustrating for him not to be able to do anything after confronting him in two of the last three years. Harry knew that there would be another confrontation in the future, he just wondered how soon it would be.

Author's Note:

For those of you that were confused I was joking in the last two notes when I suggested making Harry's animagus form manbearpig. In fact I still have no plans for Harry to have any animagus form at all. While certainly it would be a useful skill I don't think it would fit in well with this story.

Thanks for all the reviews and comments, especially those that say specifically what you like and dislike. Those help the most.

People have asked if I plan on writing anything else. While I am not currently writing any other stories I am working on ideas for a story mainly regarding Harry and Tonks. It will probably be much shorter than this one with a larger emphasis on action and the main villain won't be Voldemort but Bellatrix. Still in the works, but coming (maybe).

The next day Harry began checking the Marauder's Map periodically to see if Rita Skeeter was back on the castle grounds. So far he had not noticed her and he wondered whether she was staying away because she realized she had been caught or if she simply had other things she needed to do. Daphne had contacted her father to tell him what they had found but so far he had not heard what they were planning on doing with the information and decided to not interrupt their plotting. After all her family had been attacked in a way far more vicious than he had so it was only right that they were allowed to have their revenge.

It wasn't until that Friday that Harry finally saw Rita Skeeter's name on the Marauder's Map. She was currently between the castle and Hagrid's hut, giving him the perfect excuse to let her overhear a conversation. Daphne, along with the rest of the fourth year Slytherins, was still in class but the Gryffindors had a free period. Since he could not enlist his girlfriend's help he ran to find Hermione who was sitting in the library studying.

"Hermione, can you do me a favor and come with me to see Hagrid?" Harry asked once he found her. Hermione looked up from her book and looked at him with a puzzled expression.

"Why do you need me to go with you?" she asked, seemingly eager to get back to her book.

"Because Rita Skeeter is hanging around his hut and this is the perfect opportunity to mess with her. I'll explain on the way, ok?" Harry begged. Hermione sighed in frustration and then began to put her things away. Harry had already let her know what they had discovered regarding Rita Skeeter's illegal animagus status and so he used the time it took to walk outside to give her directions on what he wanted to do.

As they exited the castle and began the long walk towards Hagrid's home Harry rechecked the map to make sure Skeeter had noticed them. On the map he could clearly see her dot quickly approaching his and Hermione's. 'Good.' Harry thought with a smile.

"So, I got a letter from Sirius this week." Harry said using the phrase that would tell Hermione to start the conversation they had planned out on the way.

"Really? How is your godfather doing?" Hermione asked as they continued walking. No one else was around to overhear their conversation so they could feel free to say exactly what they wanted to Rita Skeeter to hear.

"He's doing well, all things considered. Still looking for that traitor, Peter Pettigrew." Harry replied, the distaste for the man evident in his tone. Hermione meanwhile just nodded at his answer.

"It's funny how things worked out, isn't it?" she asked.

"Funny? Are you mad? It's not funny that my godfather got thrown in to Azkaban without even being given a trial for a crime he didn't commit while the real traitor is given the Order of Merlin!" Harry said angrily.

"In their defense Harry everyone still thinks Peter Pettigrew is dead." Hermione commented in an apparent attempt to calm her friend.

"Well it's their fault they didn't do a very good job investigating his supposed murder. But apparently all it takes to fake your own death is to cut off your finger and find someone to blame. One of these days though, Sirius Black will have his justice."

"I'm sure that is what he wants, too. He just has to be careful with the Ministry still looking for him. He's at least somewhere safe isn't he?" Hermione asked.

"For the moment, yes. He's hiding in Berlin for a while before heading to Amsterdam in a few weeks." Harry answered, knowing full well that Sirius had not visited and had no plans to visit either of those two cities. "He can't come back until we find that rat Pettigrew. It'd go a lot easier if the Ministry would admit they made a mistake."

"Oh Harry you know that is never going to happen."

"Probably not. But can you imagine how embarrassed they are going to be when the truth comes out?" Harry said, hoping that it would catch Skeeter's attention. He knew that she loved nothing more than a potential scandal and he was offering her a good one.

"I suppose it will be funny." Hermione said with a small grin. "Oh look, there's Hagrid! Come on, Harry." With that she and Harry ran the rest of the way to Hagrid's home where the friendly half-giant welcomed them in excitedly. Harry was glad to see his friend again, even if he had only gotten the idea because he was trying to trick Rita Skeeter. And there was nothing Hagrid liked more than to have friends over for a cup of tea and some rock cakes, even if his guests turned down his tough cuisine.

Rita Skeeter meanwhile was just as excited as Hagrid, although for completely different reasons. She had seemingly stumbled on a major story! Not only did she learn that the only person to ever escape from Azkaban was Harry Potter's godfather but that the boy seemed to truly believe he was innocent and Peter Pettigrew was not just alive but guilty of the crimes Black had been accused of. Surely there must be some way to verify the claims, but she knew she would be writing a story about it either way. After all, as long as the story sold copies of the Daily Prophet who cared if she really checked her sources? And the fact that it would irritate the Ministry of Magic was a happy bonus as far as she was concerned.

'Yes,' Skeeter thought as she flew off towards the edge of the wards, 'this is going to be an award winner!'

The next day Harry sat in the Great Hall finishing his dinner. He was eager to go meet Professor Dumbledore so the older man could observe his training and hopefull" "y tell him whether or not it was having any negative effects on him. Hermione and Daphne had both expressed interest in being there but he preferred to have the meeting without the distraction they would provide. Daphne had been disappointed, but not enough so for her to not sit by him at dinner.

"I wonder what Dumbledore is going to have me do." Harry wondered aloud to no one in particular.

"If I knew I would have told you the first time you said that three days ago." Daphne answered, softly laughing at him. "You said he wants to see what you've been doing, he'll probably just let you do whatever you want."

"I still don't understand why he wants you to do this. Is it because of the Dementors?" Neville asked. Harry frowned at the question. He had not made Neville a part of his training or been as open with him as he had been with Daphne and Hermione. Part of him wanted to keep his actions as secret as possible, but another part of him argued that Neville had been a good friend to him when he needed it the most and he owed the other boy the truth.

"Neville, it's because of the training I have been doing for the tournament. It's not exactly normal." Harry began, wondering how to explain what he had doing. "I'll tell you more later, but basically it comes down to the fact that I don't react like other people do to very strenuous spell casting."

"Ok, I guess I'll just have to wait to understand it." Neville said with a laugh. Harry sighed, grateful that his friend had taken his answer so well. Harry was wondering if he should invite Neville to practice with him along with Daphne and Hermione. Although he liked Neville he was not convinced the other boy had the potential to be a powerful wizard even with a lot of work. His excellence at Herbology seemed to be evened out by his ineptitude in potions and poor spell work. Harry decided that Neville deserved a chance to prove himself, perhaps there was more to the boy than met the eye.

"I promise you, Neville, that if this goes like I am hoping I will tell you everything." Harry said sincerely. Daphne looked at him curiously, wondering what exactly her boyfriend meant by that but having a fairly good idea. It was then that they heard a familiar voice speaking behind them.

"Good evening, Harry. It's wonderful to see you again."

Harry turned to look at who was speaking to him and was surprised but happy to see...

"Professor Lupin? What are you doing here?" The former professor just laughed at Harry's question.

"I'm not your professor anymore Harry. It's just Remus, or I think you've earned the right to call me Moony like Padfoot does." Remus answered. The older man looked tired, something Harry attributed to the fact that the full moon was only a few days earlier. Despite this he still looked happier than he had been for most of the previous year when he still believed all of his friends were either dead or traitors.

"I guess I could call you Moony." Harry answered, smiling. "How have you been? I hadn't heard from you in a while."

"Doing good, Harry. You could say that I am doing some freelance work for Professor Dumbledore. That's actually part of the reason I am here tonight, I offered to help him monitor your practice tonight. If that would be ok with you, of course."

"That would be great!" Harry said excitedly. Remus had been his favorite professor and to be honest he was a little bit disappointed not to have heard from him until now, especially with all that had happened at the end of last year.

"Actually I have a feeling that he wants me to do more than just monitor, but we will have to wait and see what the old man has to say." Remus added with a small shake of his head at the thought of Dumbledore's little games. "We can go whenever you're ready."

"Thanks, Moony." Harry said obviously still feeling a little awkward using his old professor's nickname. After giving Daphne a quick kiss he said good bye to his friends and followed Remus out of the Great Hall. They were headed to a magically expanded classroom near the infirmary that Professor Dumbledore had prepared for their experiment. "So what exactly are you doing for Dumbledore?" Harry asked as they walked. Remus took a few moments to answer, clearly trying to think of a good way to phrase his response.

"Professor Dumbledore wishes to improve relations between werewolves and wizards and I am acting as sort of an ambassador. It's difficult though, especially since the Ministry of Magic considers us 'dark creatures'. It's pathetic really, I'm the ambassador and I can't even keep a job in the wizarding world because of my condition. I wouldn't listen to me in their position." Remus said with a disappointed shrug.

"Maybe he is going about this in the wrong way then. He's got a lot of political power, maybe he should start changing the laws to make them more friendly towards werewolves and then start trying to improve ties." Harry suggested.

"As powerful as he is not even Dumbledore could force through legislation like that. The laws exist as they do because that is what most of the wizarding world wants, Harry. I know you don't care about a person's blood status or wealth or whether they are even considered 'fully human', but others do. Sadly, I don't think that is going to change in the near future."

"Then it sounds like Dumbledore is wasting his time." Harry answered his former professor. Remus nodded in agreement with Harry's assessment of the situation, but unlike Harry he knew how important his mission was. The werewolves would never oppose Voldemort if he returned, but if they were lucky he could convince them to remain neutral. It was the best they could hope for. Remus decided not to continue the discussion that could lead to Harry questioning why he was on that particular mission and luckily for him had a good excuse as they had reached their destination.

When they walked through the doors Harry was immediately impressed by the changes Professor Dumbledore had made to the once tiny classroom. It had been magically expanded to at least three times its original size and the desks and chairs which once filled the room had been shoved against the wall. The floor itself had a mild cushioning charm on it which would make falls a little more bearable but not hinder a person's ability to run. A ring of stronger cushioning charms had been erected around the room a few feet away from the walls. Apparently Professor Dumbledore had prepared the room for a fight.

"Ah, Harry! So glad you could make it." Professor Dumbledore said while motioning for him to come in. "I had thought that before you begin your normal routine you might enjoy a little challenge, assuming you agree as well Remus." Remus smirked as the old man explained. He had not known exactly what the Headmaster was planning, but this was an interesting surprise. He had been told Harry was rapidly improving as he prepared for the tournament but wondered how well the student would do against his former teacher.

"Sure, Professor." Harry answered. He understood what Dumbledore was proposing before Dumbledore had to explain it. He was going to have to duel Moony. "What are the rules?"

"Just try not to cast anything too dangerous, Harry." Remus answered with a smile, not believing that Harry could do him any real damage. No one had told him exactly how well Harry had done in his duel against Barty Crouch Junior and so he was prepared to face a merely above average fourth year, not an exceptional one.

"I do have one request though." Professor Dumbledore announced, drawing Harry's attention back to him. Dumbledore held what looked like a black leather belt with a variety of runes on it in his hand and presented it to Harry. "Wear this for tonight. It will monitor your health and strength, both physical and magical. Hopefully it will help us to determine if any harm is being done to you." Harry nodded and put the belt on, relieved to note that he felt no different with it on than he did with it off.

"Are you ready, Moony?" Harry asked as he moved to the center of the room. He felt confident in his ability to put up a good fight, if not win outright. He had seen the obvious signs that his former professor was underestimating him and planned on taking advantage of that. Perhaps he would start out casting simple spells verbally and let the older man think he was going to win easily, then he would spring the trap. Harry smiled, it was a good plan.

"Of course, Harry. Just do your best." Remus answered. He failed to notice the grin this response prompted in his opponent however. The two competitors faced each other and saluted in the traditional

manner. They were standing approximately twenty feet away from each other and the room was clear of all obstructions. There would be no hiding under tables in this duel.

"Begin." Professor Dumbledore said loudly from his spot on the other side of the room where he could observe the duel.

Remus stood still, waiting for Harry to cast the first spell so he could observe his technique. Harry's first spell was a moderately powerful "Expelliarmus!" that had been almost shouted out, giving Remus plenty of time to step out of the way. Remus sent back a "Stupefy" which he cast verbally, just loud enough for Harry to hear. Harry dove out of the way of the spell dramatically before jumping to his feet and sending another disarming spell at his opponent which was easily shielded against.

Meanwhile Dumbledore watched with a growing smile, suspecting he knew how this duel would end.

Soon Remus had Harry on the run, casting a series of minor charms and hexes that Harry did not even try to shield against but instead tried to avoid. Not a single one of his spells had hit Harry yet and he was forced to admit that his opponent had exceptional speed and reflexes. Deciding to end the duel, Remus started trying to force Harry into a corner. Harry saw what Remus was attempting and let him do it, knowing that his opponent was on the verge of being convinced that the duel was over. Finally Harry found himself in a position where he could no longer avoid his opponent's spell, he must either let it hit him or shield against it. Harry smiled and knew it was time to show Remus what he was really capable of.

'Protego!' Harry thought and an impressive blue shield formed in front of him, much to the surprise of his former professor. He then, using the spell linking technique that Professor Flitwick had told him about, began a chain of spells that he had been working on for the past week or so. It began with an Auguamenti aimed at Remus's feet, soaking his shoes and pants. The spell confused Remus so he ignored it and tried to avoid the next spell that Harry had immediately cast, an Impedementia which was designed to trip him up. That did not hit him and Remus was able to shield against the Incarcerous

which followed it. By now Remus was beginning to realize he had been fooled but there was little he could do to take back the advantage. Harry was now on the move as he cast, ready to dodge anything that was sent his way but Remus had to keep his shield up to protect himself. The fact that Harry was now casting silently only made things more difficult. Remus, unfortunately for him, had his shield aimed too high to prevent Harry's next spell from hitting him. It was a freezing charm and Remus groaned as he now saw the purpose of the water summoning charm that Harry had cast previously. His shoes and the bottom of his pants were now frozen solid, making movement very difficult.

Harry's chain of spells ended with a cutting curse aimed at Remus' chest. Instead of moving, however, the older man said "Avis" and summoned a dozen birds to stand in the way of Harry's curse. When the spell hit it destroyed two of the conjured birds while the rest flew around Remus as if trying to form a shield. Harry reacted quickly to the spell and cast a wide 'Incendio' which lit all of the remaining birds on fire. He then banished the flaming and panicking creatures back at his opponent who was forced to vanish them. Unfortunately for him the distraction from the birds and the moment it took to get rid of them was all Harry needed to move across the room and fire a stunner from an angle that Remus was not expecting and was not able to block.

When Remus next opened his eyes he was laying flat on the ground staring up at Harry, who had a wide grin on his face. He groaned in frustration, realizing he had been beaten. His humbling at his former students hands was completed when he heard Dumbledore clapping.

"Very well done, Harry. I must say that your reaction to Remus's bird summoning charm was quite unexpected." Professor Dumbledore said as Harry helped Remus to his feet.

"I agree, Harry." Remus added. "I was a fool not to see that you were tricking me into underestimating you. Perhaps next time you won't be so lucky."

"So do you want to go again?" Harry asked eagerly.

"Not tonight, I think I've suffered all of the embarrassment I can for one night." Remus said with a small chuckle. "You should try dueling Sirius, he was always far better than me anyway. I am sure he has lots he could teach you." Harry smiled and nodded at the suggestion, he was planning on suggesting just that to his godfather if they were able to find a way around the restrictions on underage magic.

"Might I offer a suggestion, Harry?" Dumbledore asked softly. "Perhaps you could practice conjuration for the rest of the night. It is one of the more draining branches of magic, especially when attempting permanent conjuration, and I think it might also allow me some insight into how far you have come in these past few months."

"That would be fine with me, Professor." Harry answered. "What should I start with?"

"The easiest items to conjure are inanimate objects, especially if they are constructed of a single material. Greater complexity requires greater strength. Tell me, have you attempted permanent conjuration before?"

"No, sir. I've mostly been focusing on things that would help me in the tournament and I just didn't see how that would help. I've read up on it some though." Harry answered, a little ashamed of himself for overlooking such an important branch of magic.

"No harm there, Harry." Professor Dumbledore assured him. "This is magic at a level beyond even the NEWTs. Temporary conjuration is sufficient for most circumstances, such as during your duel when Remus conjured the birds for use as a shield. A very effective tactic, I might add, considering that even the Unforgivables would be stopped if they struck one of the birds. Also, many witches and wizards are not capable of permanent conjuration unless the object being conjured is very simple and very small. For our first test I would recommend a small item made of a single material. Perhaps a metal spoon? Remember that some materials are harder to conjure than others, such as silver or bronze. And it is impossible to conjure gold without help from the Philosopher's Stone. Do you need any help with the procedure?"

"I don't think so, sir." Harry answered. "The incantation is 'Conjurus Aeternus' and if you don't have a clear enough picture of what you are trying to conjure or enough energy to conjure it the spell simply won't work. Nothing happens."

"Very good. Proceed whenever you are ready." Professor Dumbledore and Remus watched, each wondering what Harry would be capable of doing at this point in his development.

Harry nodded and closed his eyes, trying to focus on the item he was attempting to conjure. In his mind he pictured a spoon of the same design as the ones that were used at Hogwarts. He concentrated on its shape and the decorative pattern on the handle. He tried to keep in mind that he wanted it to be made of steel, which he knew would be easier than silver or bronze. Finally confident he had prepared himself, Harry opened his eyes and pointed his wand at the table where he wanted the conjured spoon to appear. Then he performed the simple wand movement and spoke "Conjurus Aeternus." Briefly he felt a small strain as his body gathered the required energy to complete the spell, but that soon passed and after a small flash of light his conjured spoon appeared.

The spoon was shaped just as it should be, right down to the intricate design on the handle he had worried about getting right. The steel it was made of was also perfectly formed with no blemish visible. There was only one slight problem. While the spoons used at Hogwarts were about six inches long, Harry's conjured spoon was closer to two and a half feet long making it look more like a small shovel than a spoon.

"My spoon is too big." Harry commented with a little bit of disappointment. Meanwhile Professor Dumbledore and Remus were laughing at the mistake.

"Well done, Harry." Dumbledore said. "Though next time you might want to spend a little more time focusing on how big you wish the object to be." Harry shrugged and agreed with the Professor. He was determined to get it right, although this time he felt he was up to a little more of a challenge. Once again he concentrated on the spoon,

this time remembering to note that he wanted it to be the same size as a normal spoon, and recast the spell. After another small tug on his magic and a flash of light another spoon appeared in front of them. Unlike the previous one this spoon was perfectly sized and made of bronze instead of steel. Harry rushed over to the spoon and picked it up so he could inspect it. When he was satisfied he passed it to Professor Dumbledore who did the same.

"Excellent!" he finally commented. "The use of bronze is quite impressive, Harry. I do believe you are ready to move to the next level, which is more complex inanimate objects. Something made from several different materials and perhaps a little bigger."

"Ok, Professor." Harry answered and started thinking of what to conjure next. After a moment he finally decided on an object he thought Professor Dumbledore might appreciate and began preparing to cast the spell. Once he was ready he spoke the incantation and was pleased to see the object he had been thinking about appear in front of him.

"Splendid!" laughed Professor Dumbledore as he rushed over to inspect the item Harry had conjured. It was a perfect replica of the chair he sat in while in the Great Hall, although in this case the gold features had been replaced with bronze. Other than that every aspect of the chair appeared to be the same. Dumbledore sat in the chair and commented "Quite comfortable as well." while Harry smiled at his accomplishment. He was breathing a little heavier now than he had before, the spell had taken quite a bit out of him. Remus came over to him and put a hand on his shoulder. When Harry turned his head towards his former professor he saw the older man looking at him with concern.

"I'm fine, Moony. That was just harder than I expected." Harry answered.

"That is no surprise." Dumbledore answered from his new chair, which he showed no intention of leaving. "There is a significant amount of bronze in this chair which as I noted earlier was a very difficult material to conjure." In truth, Dumbledore was very impressed that Harry was able to do it at all. But on the other hand he was

becoming accustomed to being surprised by the young man. "When you are ready to continue I suggest we move on to the next step in permanent conjuration which is inanimate objects with small moving parts. Perhaps a watch or a clock."

"But I don't really know how one of those works." Harry said uncertainly.

"Very true, but the magic does. The reason this kind of conjuration is more difficult is that you will be using more magic to make up for your lack of knowledge on how the item actually works. Now if you were a watchmaker then this task would be quite simple because you already knew what the parts are and how they are arranged, resulting in less magic being needed to compensate. This is one of the most important rules of conjuration and one of the things that differentiates temporary and permanent conjuration, and also why permanently conjuring living beings is so difficult that very few have ever been able to do it. Few wizards have either the knowledge or the magical power required to do even what you are attempting, but I am confident you will be able to."

"I'll try my best." Harry replied, hoping he would be able to manage it. He thought for a moment and remembered the old grandfather clock that his Aunt Petunia liked to claim was a priceless family heirloom. It was kept not far from his cupboard under the stairs and over the years he had grown to like its hourly chimes. He was never allowed to touch it unless he was cleaning it, but he had still spent many hours looking at it and wondering how it worked. Its details were easy for him to recall, and a few moments later he felt ready to cast the spell.

"Conjurus Aeternus." Harry softly said. As he did he could feel his already tired magic struggling with the spell. He knew that after this he was going to be close reaching his exhaustion point. The strain was so intense that it was almost painful, but in the back of his mind Harry knew that if he poured all of his strength into it he would be able to finish it. With one final push of magical energy Harry was rewarded with a bright flash signaling that his efforts had been successful. Standing in the center of the room where there was once nothing was a beautiful replica of the clock that was currently sitting in

the Dursley's living room. Harry smiled at his accomplishment and then promptly fell to his knees in exhaustion.

"Harry!" Remus shouted as he rushed over to check on him. "Do you feel ok?" Harry weakly gave him a thumbs up in response, not really wanting to expend any more energy than that.

"Let him rest for a moment." Professor Dumbledore advised. "I believe that will be all for tonight." Harry gave a small nod and shifted to sit down on the floor while Remus walked over to talk to Professor Dumbledore.

"What were you thinking asking him to do that?" Remus said softly but forcefully, hoping Harry wouldn't overhear their conversation.

"I am as surprised as you that he was able to do it. Perhaps he has a better understanding of how such devices are constructed than he indicated." Dumbledore replied with a small frown. "I have come to expect great things from Harry and yet he is still able to surprise me. Trust me, Remus. I care for him just as you and Sirius do."

Harry was looking away during their conversation but was still able to hear it. He wondered what it meant that he was able to do something a little more difficult than Dumbledore thought he could. Perhaps he was merely improving faster than he thought. He sighed and decided to think about later when he didn't feel like he was a moment away from falling asleep.

"I think I'll head to the infirmary now if that's ok with you." Harry said as he tried to stifle a yawn.

"A fine idea." Dumbledore replied. "I will come speak with you in the morning to discuss what we have learned. I believe Remus would be willing to accompany you?" Remus nodded and walked over to Harry. With a little bit of effort Harry was able to make it to his feet.

"I'll get him there safely, Professor." Remus answered the Headmaster.

"In that case I shall bid you good night, Harry. Could you stop by my office when you are finished, Remus? I have something I would like to discuss with you." Dumbledore asked. Remus nodded in response and they all left the room. The trip to the infirmary was short but still Harry was almost asleep as soon as he hit the hospital bed.

"Night, Moony." Harry said quietly.

"Good night, Harry." Remus answered with a smile on his face. 'It really isn't fair that Sirius can't be here for this,' the werewolf thought. 'Perhaps that will change one day.' After transfiguring Harry's clothes into something more appropriate for sleeping in Remus left and headed towards Dumbledore's office leaving Madam Pomfrey to begin checking on her new patient.

Author's Note:

You guys have been giving me some really insightful reviews and I hope you keep it up. I love to hear what you like and dislike about the story so far. Thanks again.

Kudos to any of you that catch the Don Hertzfeldt reference, if not don't worry about it. Or go watch "Rejected", which I recommend anyway.

Harry awoke to the sounds of Madam Pomfrey going through her morning routine. He closed his eyes and pulled the sheets back over himself in the hopes that he could get a few minutes more sleep but Madam Pomfrey must have noticed he was awake and took the opportunity to stand over his bed and begin casting a few diagnostic charms.

"You can stop pretending, Mr Potter. I know you are awake." the school nurse said.

"Ten more minutes." Harry requested, drawing a laugh out of Pomfrey.

"I'll call for one of the house elves to bring you breakfast." she said and walked away to continue preparing for the day. Harry opened his eyes and looked through a window on the other side of the room to see that the sun must have risen an hour or more before he woke up. Sighing, he decided it probably was time for him to get out of bed. He was preparing to do just that when Dobby appeared in front of him holding a huge serving platter that held at least a dozen plates. Each plate was stacked with what appeared to be every type of breakfast food Harry had ever seen offered at Hogwarts.

"Dobby! What are you doing with all that food?" Harry asked as the little elf struggled to balance all of the plates he was carrying. To Harry's relief he was able to set them down on a nearby table without dropping a single one.

"I is bring it for you Harry Potter sir!" Dobby said proudly. "Dobby heard you would be needing your breakfast brought to you and I told the other elves that nobody but me would do it. Some of the kitchen elves didn't like that, but Dobby insisted."

"You did great Dobby, though I think you might have brought too much food. How about you stay and have breakfast with me?" Harry asked. Dobby immediately started crying and leapt at Harry to give him a hug. Harry was briefly surprised with the house elf's speed and behavior, but then again it was typical of Dobby.

"Harry Potter is too kind! He is being the greatest wizard ever!" Dobby said between sobs. Harry hugged the elf back and hoped he would settle down a bit.

"So how about it? Going to stay and have breakfast with me?" Harry asked. Dobby immediately lowered his head as if ashamed of himself.

"Dobby can't. I promised a kitchen elf I would do his work and mine so I could bring Harry Potter his breakfast. Dobby is sorry."

"It's ok, Dobby. We can do it some other time, alright? You're my friend, don't feel like you need an excuse to come talk to me." Harry said. Dobby nodded and gave Harry another big hug before popping off to get back to work. Harry smiled as he thought about his strangely devoted little friend and began looking over the plates trying to decide what he wanted. Even though he was quite hungry, as was normal after one of his training sessions, he knew there was still no way he was ever going to be able to finish even half of what Dobby had brought.

"Harry!" a familiar female voice called from the doorway. Harry turned to see his friend Hermione walking in. He wasn't really surprised that Hermione had gotten here before Daphne because his girlfriend had told him she would come by at eight o'clock to check on him and she was almost always right on time. He had not seen a clock yet this morning so he knew it must still be before eight. "You don't really plan on eating all of that, do you?"

"I could probably be persuaded to share if you're hungry." Harry replied. Hermione smiled and grabbed a bowl of fruit off of the tray before walking over to Harry's bed and sitting in a nearby chair.

"So what happened?" she asked eagerly.

"I haven't heard anything from Professor Dumbledore this morning." Harry answered. "I guess he will be here sometime soon. Last night he had me duel Moony and then work on permanent conjuration."

"Moony? You mean Professor Lupin right?" Hermione asked as Harry nodded in response. "Did you really perform permanent conjuration? Most people can't do that at all."

"Yeah, I did. It was pretty tiring, but I think that was mainly because of all the bronze I was conjuring" Harry responded. Upon hearing this Hermione's eyes opened wide in shock and she gasped.

"You're not joking, are you?" Hermione asked, still surprised by Harry's statement. "Harry, there are probably only a couple dozen wizards or witches alive that can conjure bronze or silver. Very little research has been done on permanent conjuration because the ability to master it is so rare. In fact the last in depth study was completed over two hundred years ago. You might think this is silly, but I was really hoping I would be able to do it so that in a few years I could begin experimenting and write the definitive work on the subject. Nobody seems to have thought to use muggle chemistry to investigate permanent conjuration."

"Wow, Hermione. That seems like a pretty lofty goal." Harry said.

"I know." Hermione said proudly. "I had hoped it would force the wizarding world to reconsider their opinions on muggleborns as well. You know what this means though, don't you Harry?"

"What?" he asked uncertainly. He could tell when his friend was up to something, and she definitely was now.

"I don't have to wait to start experimenting! Congratulations Harry, you've just volunteered to be my research assistant." Hermione looked as excited as a little kid at Christmas time and Harry knew he would have no choice but to offer her his assistance. She would never leave him alone if he didn't.

"Fine." Harry grumbled, "I will help, but you are going to have to remember that we can't spend every hour of the day working on this. I know how obsessed you get."

"I do not get obsessed!" Hermione said defensively, "I just think that academics and research are more important than you do." Harry

shrugged at her response, knowing full well that no one could ever change Hermione's study habits. He wondered how much time she would be wanting to spend on this new project and hoped that since she didn't think she would be able to start it for another few years she wouldn't have too much thought out yet. Hermione began tapping her foot anxiously, a sign that Harry knew meant she was eager to get out of the infirmary and start working. Harry could not help but laugh at his friend's behavior even when his laughter was met with her annoyed glare. Their silent argument was interrupted when Harry noticed Daphne walking in to the room.

"Daphne!" he called as she walked towards him. Harry jumped up from the hospital bed he had been sitting on to give his girlfriend a kiss before leading her back over to where he had been talking with Hermione.

"Are you ok?" Daphne asked, the concern clearly evident in her voice.

"I'm fine, just waiting for Dumbledore." Harry answered.

"I do not believe you will have to wait for much longer." a voice called from the infirmary's entrance. The three teens turned to see Professor Dumbledore smiling back at them. "I hope you had a pleasant stay, Harry. I believe you have been one of Madam Pomfrey's more frequent guests."

"No problems, Professor. Although I would like to get out of here as soon as possible." Harry answered.

"An understandable goal." Dumbledore said with a nod. "I have some results from our observation last night, and to be honest I have never seen anything like it. First off let me ease any fears you may have had and assure you that there appears to be no lasting damage done to either your body or your magic from your brief episode of magical exhaustion."

"So I can keep training?" Harry asked eagerly.

"There does not seem to be any reason for you not to." Dumbledore admitted. "However I would ask you to wear the monitoring belt the

next few times so we can perhaps gain a better understanding of what is happening. You see Harry you are now approximately one percent stronger than you were at this time yesterday, a result I was not expecting."

"One percent? That doesn't sound like much." Harry said.

"You're wrong, Harry." Daphne interrupted. "That shouldn't be possible."

"Ms Greengrass is correct, Harry." Dumbledore confirmed. "And there is reason to believe that you have been improving at a similar rate every time you have pushed yourself to the point of magical exhaustion. Think of it this way Harry, if you were to the rate of your improvement is constant that would mean you could double your magical power in just over three months. In a year you could nearly quadruple it. However I wish to further observe you to determine if the gains in strength you are receiving are in fact constant or if they are slowing down."

"You forgot to mention the third possibility, Professor." Hermione said softly. "The increases could be accelerating."

"But why is this happening?" Harry asked.

"I have wondered that myself for a long time now." Dumbledore answered. "I have come to the conclusion that it is an unexpected result of what happened to you the night Voldemort tried to kill you. Previously I told you that I believed it was your mother's love that protected you from Voldemort's killing curse, and I still believe that. However, simply loving another is not enough to grant that kind of protection. Your mother was a very talented witch with a thirst for knowledge that would even rival Ms Granger's, and it is my belief that she either found or created a ritual that would use her sacrifice to protect you."

"So you don't really know what she did." Harry said

"No, sadly I do not. There is therefore no way to know what side effects this ritual may have had." Dumbledore responded. "That is not

the end of it however. I suspect that Voldemort was attempting to use your death as a part of a very dark ritual."

"Which ritual?" Daphne asked. The Greengrasses had an extensive library full information, including some on dark rituals, and even if she had not heard of the ritual she thought there was a good chance she could find it there.

"Perhaps when you are older I will explain more fully." Dumbledore answered. His response did not please any of the people listening to him. "What Voldemort was not expecting was for his killing curse to be reflected back at him, although since you are the only known person to survive it perhaps we should not be surprised at his mistake. There is also no way to know what the effects of surviving the killing curse are. Finally, you were used in one more ritual that night."

"What?" Harry asked in surprise. "Who did it?"

"I did, Harry." Dumbledore replied. "In order to ensure your safety I created strong protections around your Aunt's home using Lily's sacrifice as their base. It was a confusing time and I admit I was not certain my plan would work, but the wards now surrounding your home are stronger than any I could have ever created on my own. However I must tell you that it is possible my actions could have had unintended consequences."

"So what do you think did it?" Hermione asked as she tried to piece together the puzzle.

"It could have been any one of them, or all of them working together perhaps. What I can say is that it was a series of events that completely unique and I do not expect anyone to ever be able to replicate." Dumbledore said. "I must ask you to keep this information to yourselves, I would not want it to get back to Voldemort lest he try to recreate it. I had considered only telling Harry, however I knew it would quickly be told to the two of you and thought I would save him the trouble of repeating it."

"What now, Professor?" Harry asked. Dumbledore's explanation had left him confused and worried about what had been done to him and what it meant for the future.

"Continue as you were. It appears you have been given a gift, Harry. Take advantage of it." Dumbledore instructed. "You have the potential to be a powerful force for good in our world, try not to let that opportunity pass you by. Now I suppose you are eager to leave and I will not take up any more of your time. Have a good day, to all of you." With that the Headmaster left the room, leaving the three students alone. Each of them was thinking about what they had learned. None of them were very happy with how little actual information they had been given. Hermione saw it as a puzzle to be solved and knew that she was missing a lot of the pieces. Daphne wondered about the ritual that Professor Dumbledore had refused to name. The number of rituals that required a human sacrifice had to be small, didn't it?

Harry, meanwhile, was trying to come to terms with the news Dumbledore had given him regarding his own special brand of training. It meant he could rapidly improve. It meant that perhaps one day he would be able to match Voldemort's power. It meant that he could protect his friends and loved ones. Most of all, it meant that he might actually survive the upcoming war. Harry had never really feared for his life, but still he knew that it was constantly at risk and that trend showed no signs of ending. Now that he knew his training wasn't hurting him he swore to himself that he would push himself as far as he could go.

"Harry, I'm going to go. We'll talk later about our project ok?" Hermione said as she stood up. Dumbledore's talk had not dulled her desire to head to the library and work on her own ideas. Harry nodded and waved good-bye leaving Harry and Daphne alone in the room.

"Let's take a walk." Harry suggested. "I'm sick of this room." Daphne grinned and took his hand as they walked out the door. Harry led them outside, away from anyone who could be trying to listen to the conversation. A quick check of the Marauder's Map confirmed that Rita Skeeter wasn't in the area either.

"Well, what do you think?" Harry finally asked. Daphne paused to consider her response.

"No one can know about this, Harry." his girlfriend answered. "Don't tell anyone else unless it is a life or death situation. Not even your godfather."

"Don't you think that is just a bit paranoid?" Harry asked.

"No. Think of what could happen if someone found out. At best you would spend the rest of your life having tests run on you to find out why you're different." Daphne replied. "And this means that one day you could be one of the most powerful wizards alive, meaning that if anybody wants you dead they should come after you as soon as possible. This is just too important to tell anyone else."

"I see your point, but I still think I should tell Sirius. He can help me with this, I know he can."

"Just wait until you see him, ok? The mail isn't always trustworthy." she said. Harry knew she was right on this, but hiding the information from those closest to him still went against his natural instincts. "I don't trust Dumbledore, either. He's hiding something."

"He always is." Harry answered. "Lots of strange people are constantly coming in and out of the castle to see him and he wouldn't tell me what Voldemort was trying to do the night he murdered my parents. Maybe he shouldn't be expected to spill all of his secrets to a student, but there are things that do affect me that he isn't telling me."

"According to my father that's just the way Dumbledore is. He doesn't seem to think anyone but himself needs to know all of what is going on. That's one of the reasons so many people refused to side with him in the last war. Something's happening, Harry. Something big, and we're not being let in on any of it."

"I get that feeling too." Harry admitted. "But what can we do about it? For the moment, nothing. So we trust Dumbledore to do what's best until we are in a better position and actually know what is happening."

"For the most part you're right." Daphne agreed with a sigh. "How about a less frustrating subject. Next week is a Hogsmeade weekend and you owe me one free of Dementors and Draco Malfoy."

"That's true." Harry said with a laugh. "I'm sure we can be attacked by something far more entertaining this time. How about a mountain troll?"

"You've already done that." Daphne answered, shaking her head. "You need something new and different. How do you feel about manticores?"

"No thanks. We could always just skip Hogsmeade and wonder around in the Forbidden Forest, I am sure that there are all kinds of dangerous things there that we haven't ever thought of." Harry said jokingly. Daphne laughed at his suggestion and soon Harry was laughing too. They spent the rest of the afternoon together in similar fashion, each enjoying the company of the other and trying to ignore the suspicion that soon things would be changing in ways they could not imagine. The fact that they spent the day away from the rest of the student body also ensured that it was not until later that night that they heard about the special edition of the Daily Prophet that was beginning to stir up a lot of controversy.

MISCARRIAGE OF JUSTICE: SIRIUS BLACK INNOCENT! PETER PETTIGREW ALIVE!

by Rita Skeeter

The Ministry of Magic has been lying to all of us for almost fourteen years.

Some of you may have a hard time believing that, but the evidence is overwhelming. Following a tip from a source who wishes to remain anonymous I began investigating the circumstances surrounding the death of the James and Lily Potter and the subsequent imprisonment of Sirius Black. At the time very little attention was paid to the matter as the wizarding world was caught up in the celebration of the defeat

of You-Know-Who. Sadly, while we were not watching a great mistake was made.

At the time it was said that Sirius Black had become a Death Eater and betrayed his friends to the Dark Lord. Black, however, was examined upon his arrest and found to not have taken the Dark Mark. Despite this he was thrown into Azkaban without being given a trial and was held there until two years ago when he managed to become the first person to ever escape from the famous prison. Sirius Black was never given the chance to defend himself or plead his case, a fact that should shame the Ministry.

Still, that evidence is not enough to prove Mr Black's innocence. During my investigation an unexpected source came forward to offer information that has never been heard before which could rock the Ministry to its foundations. Our source was a Auror back in the fall of 1981 and was a part of the team that brought Sirius Black in. He was assigned as Mr Black's guard upon their arrival to the Ministry of Magic and stayed with him until he was left at Azkaban. It was then that he witnessed an event the Ministry has denied ever happened: the questioning of Sirius Black under the influence of Veritaserum. Present during this questioning were Sirius Black, his guard, and two others.

One was, at the time, the head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement Bartemius Crouch Senior. The other was a Junior Minister from the Department of Magical Catastrophes who had been one of the first people on the scene when Black was arrested. He was also a strong supporter of former Minister of Magic Millicent Bagnold and willing to do anything to protect her. That man's name was Cornelius Fudge.

After verifying that the Veritaserum was working Crouch began the interrogation. His first question was to ask if Sirius Black was a Death Eater. Black answered "No" to the surprise of all present. He was then asked if he had betrayed Lily and James Potter. Again he answered "No". Then Crouch asked if he had caused the explosion which resulted in the deaths of a dozen muggles. His answer was "No, Pettigrew did it." Stunned, Crouch stated that Peter Pettigrew

was dead. Black responded to that by saying "No, Peter cut off his finger and escaped so that everyone would think he was dead."

What you must remember is that at this time it was already being reported that Sirius Black was a traitor and Peter Pettigrew was a hero. Minister Bagnold was being praised for the brilliant performance of her Aurors and her handling of the crisis. Black's admission would ruin all of that and do serious political harm to Bagnold, a fact which both Fudge and Crouch knew. Their jobs and political futures both depended on keeping Bagnold in office and so in a little room in the Ministry of Magic two men conspired to send an innocent man to Azkaban. They agreed that Black could never have a trial and that Minister Bagnold should not be informed of what they had learned. Black was then Obliviated by Crouch so that he would not have any memory of the interrogation. Fudge attempted to do the same to Black's guard, however the future Minister must not have been as good with memory charms as Crouch because he left the guard slightly confused but with his memories intact. Afterwards the guard, worried about his own future and the safety of his family, decided not to come forward with his tale. It is only now, after having left the Aurors, that he felt safe enough to tell the truth.

I have personally witnessed the interrogation through the use of a pensieve and have further received a Wizard's Oath that the story is true. I have no doubts that it is. My source is willing to be questioned by the Wizengamot to confirm his claims. Now is the time for action. Minister Fudge has declared that Sirius Black is to be immediately given the Dementor's Kiss upon capture. That decree must be withdrawn and then a full investigation concerning Minister Fudge's actions must be initiated. The good witches and wizards of Britain deserve better from their leaders, and Sirius Black deserves better from his government. He deserves to be reunited with his godson, Harry Potter.

FOR MORE ON SIRIUS BLACK, see page 6

FOR MORE ON MINISTER FUDGE, see page 10

Later that evening Harry sat in the Room of Requirement and read the article with a huge grin on his face. When he had impulsively

decided to use Rita Skeeter to try and help Sirius he had never hoped that it would turn out this well. And as a bonus he might even get to bring down Fudge without his name being associated with it. He had gotten extremely lucky and he knew it.

"This is fantastic, Harry!" Hermione said from where she was seated and also reading the paper. Daphne meanwhile was snuggled up next to him so that they could both use the same paper. He felt her hug him a little tighter in agreement with Hermione's statement.

"What do you think will happen now?" Harry asked. He had a few guessed but was always eager to hear opinions from his friend and girlfriend. Although they came from very different backgrounds they were both very intelligent and wanted to help him, a fact he knew he could depend on if he needed to.

"If this is true then Fudge will be out of office by the start of summer." Daphne answered. "It might even be worth delaying our revenge on Skeeter if she is going to keep focusing on this story, which she will since it's good for her ego."

"What do you have planned for Skeeter anyway?" Hermione asked. Harry looked over at Daphne and wondered if she would answer. Even he didn't know what she had been thinking of doing.

"Nothing too bad, she might even come out of it alive and in one piece. Maybe." Daphne said with an evil grin. "It doesn't matter if we delay a bit, father still isn't finished with the potion he's been brewing for her. Don't ask Hermione, you really don't want to know." Hermione looked a little disappointed but wisely decided not to push for more information.

"Fudge is obviously going to fight this." Harry said, "But will the Daily Prophet stick by their reporter even if it means going against the Minister?"

"Yes." Daphne answered with a nod. "This is the best thing that could have happened for them. Their sales are going to see a huge increase because of the controversy, and that is what they are the

most concerned with. They act like the ministry's spokesperson when it is a good business decision. It isn't anymore."

"Wherever he is, Sirius needs to be careful." Hermione added. "As long as he is in power Fudge is dangerous and still wants him to get the Dementor's Kiss. Especially since he will be blaming all of his troubles on Sirius now." Harry thought about it and decided she was probably right. He just hoped that Sirius realized that as well.

"How do you two feel about inviting Neville to join our practices?" Harry asked after a few moments of silence.

"Longbottom?" Daphne asked skeptically. "I don't know Harry, I'm still not convinced he can be much help."

"He still deserves the right to learn how to defend himself." Harry responded. Daphne sighed, knowing that Harry had already made up his mind on the subject.

"Fine. Bring him along." Daphne finally said. Harry smiled and kissed her in thanks. "But if he can't keep up he's your responsibility."

"That's ok with me." Harry said, happy that Daphne wasn't going to fight him on this. "I'll need you help too, Hermione. We'll need to figure out what Neville is good at beside Herbology and help him from there."

"I don't know why you think I could help with that, Harry." Hermione said sadly. "I still can't find anything I'm good at, at least Neville has Herbology."

"Don't say that Hermione. You have a lot of potential; I can sense it in you." Harry replied, hoping he could make his friend see reason. "You're good in everything to start with. It doesn't matter that you aren't a prodigy in all branches of magic. We've already figured out you are better with healing charms than me and Daphne. That's a good place to start isn't it?"

"I suppose so." Hermione said, still clearly disappointed with herself.

Harry and Daphne continued talking for a while, but Hermione barely listened. Soon after the couple said their goodbyes and left Hermione alone in the Room of Requirement. She felt weak and worried that when Neville came even he would surpass her. Her whole life she had always tried to be her best and that trait had lived on after discovering she was a witch. She had dedicated herself to learning all there was to know about magic, but now she was coming to the realization that it wasn't enough. In many ways she felt that she was still not good enough and she had no idea how to fix it. Their practicing would help but she did not believe she would ever be as powerful as Daphne, and knowing what she did now she knew there was no hope of ever catching Harry. The only answer she could think of to her problem lay in a few of the rituals that she had heard references to, but they were very dark and had awful consequences.

"I am not willing to go down that path!" she said out loud, even though she was alone. But inside, a quieter voice was asking 'Am I?'

Shaking her head in hopes to make the question go away, Hermione realized that even if she did want to look into rituals that could help her there was no way for her to learn about them. The books that described them were too dark to even be found in the restricted section of the library.

"It was a silly idea." she said with a nervous laugh. "You can't just wish for information like that." Her fake laughs were stopped when a table appeared in front of her with large book lying on it. The book was bound in a black material that resembled leather but with enough differences she knew it was something else. The book was obviously old and fragile, so when Hermione touched it she was careful not to harm it. When she opened the cover she saw that it was written in English but in a very old dialect that was difficult for her to understand. She wondered what it was when the answer suddenly came to her.

"I asked for this book, didn't I? And the Room of Requirement provided it." Hermione gasped. Inside this book, she knew, was information on rituals. Most of which would be very dark in nature. "No!" she yelled and walked towards the door trying to forget what she had found. But as she reached for the doorknob she stopped and turned to look back at the book. 'Surely it wouldn't hurt to just read the

book.' she thought uncertainly. Minutes past as she stood, unmoving, and tried to decide what do. Finally, she took her hand off the door and walked back to the table. Carefully, she picked up the book and took it back to her chair and began to read.

Author's Note:

I'm curious what you guys think about how the Hermione situation is developing. I said previously that I thought Hermione would do almost anything for Harry, but just how far is she really willing to go? Please review and let me know if you like where I am taking this. Thanks.

In the days that followed the most popular topic for conversation in the wizarding world was Rita Skeeter's article and the accusations it contained. Minister Fudge immediately called a press conference to deny everything, but the suspicions remained. It did not help his cause that the Daily Prophet, which had seen its sales soar after Skeeter's initial article, refused to back down from their position. Rumors circulated concerning the identity of the unnamed Auror who had agreed to testify against Minister Fudge, but all the paper would say of him was that he was currently living at a safe house under powerful wards for his own protection.

Fudge's political enemies saw his weakened position and took advantage of it by calling for the Minister to resign. Fudge, of course, refused and insisted that he was innocent. When it was clear that Minister Fudge was not going to leave his post willingly, his rivals then began demanding that he be brought before the Wizengamot and forced to answer their questions. Fudge tried to fight this request as well but it soon became clear he would eventually have to face the Wizengamot. The only tactic he had left at that point was to stall by saying that he needed time to prepare his defense. Reluctantly, his enemies agreed to give him some time and negotiations began to determine when the hearing would be held. After a few days Fudge and his aides suggested that June 24 would be the earliest they could be ready. They hoped that no one would realize that June 24 was also the day that the third task of the Triwizard Tournament was to be held, an event that would surely draw attention away from the hearing. Unfortunately for Fudge, his rivals realized what he was trying to do and decided that the best day for them would be June 25. Fudge had little choice but to bitterly accept this date.

And so the date was agreed upon. The general mood of the public was that it would be Fudge's last day in office. With that in mind several people began to campaign to be the next Minister of Magic. Current head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement Amelia Bones gained a lot of support when she went against Minister Fudge's demands and struck down the decree that Sirius Black should immediately receive the Dementor's Kiss upon capture. Minister Fudge's furious reaction to her disobedience did not help him win any supporters. A plethora of other names were also suggested,

although with a few months left none had really become a favorite to win the position if it did become available.

Harry, meanwhile, could not have been happier with how things had developed. Not only did it mean that Sirius could finally receive justice but it gave the Daily Prophet something else to spend its time on and there was a good chance that Minister Fudge, whom he did not like, would soon be replaced. He could not help but laugh when he realized that none of it would be possible if he had not tricked Rita Skeeter into doing what he wanted her to do. 'That wasn't very Gryffindor of me, was it?' he thought with a grin.

Days later Hermione sat alone in the Room of Requirement reading the book she had found. Due to its age and condition she did not dare move it in fears that it would be destroyed. She had the strong feeling that this book had been the result of a lifetime of work by its author and was truly one of a kind. She had never heard of it before and upon further searching could find no references to it anywhere else. Hermione wondered how long it had been sitting in the Room of Requirement apparently forgotten to all and who had been the last to read it. Perhaps it had been here since the four founders built the castle, she did not know.

Slowly she had become more accustomed to reading the ancient text and could now understand what was being said in almost all instances. What she found was that, unlike the Ministry of Magic, the author did not consider all rituals dark or evil in nature. What they had in common was some benefit being provided as a result of a sacrifice. Sacrifice, she realized, was the one thing that all rituals had in common. That did not mean, however, that an animal or person had to die for all of the sacrifices (although that was the case in many of them). Sometimes the sacrifice required was a prized possession or even a body part. She had been excited to find a ritual that would increase a witch's intelligence until she found that it would require sacrificing her virginity to a goblin under a full moon. She quickly decided that she was not interested in that one. Hermione found it all quite fascinating and found herself questioning the Ministry's stance that all rituals were dark. Not all of them included harming others or would affect a person's morals or sanity, so why lump them all together?

The book ended with notes on a ritual that she surprisingly recognized: The Ritual of Heron. However in modern times it had become known as the Riddle of Heron. It was famous because no one knew what it was or how to do it and yet every century or so a new wizard would claim to have figured it out, only to be disappointed when his ideas didn't work. Over two thousand years ago the ritual's creator had left a series of cryptic notes that had long since fascinated those who read them. The intriguing part of this book was that the author insisted to that he had found notes on the ritual from the creator that others had overlooked. Using this he pieced together much more of the instructions than anyone else ever had (assuming his notes were real of course). The author, however, had eventually reached a point from which he could go no further.

Hermione had always loved both riddles and challenge and began closely studying the author's work on the subject. She found herself agreeing with his conclusions on the hints left by the creator. The ritual would need nine different materials and nine different runes, not the seven or eight of each that modern wizards thought necessary. The book's author was convinced he had determined which nine runes would be needed but he could not figure out which nine materials were necessary. Hermione was very interested to find that the hints tied in with her research on permanent conjuration when she read that one of the materials could not be conjured and the eight others could only be done so with great difficulty. The author believed that four of the nine materials were gold, silver, bronze, and copper while he suspected that one of the others was a liquid of some kind.

Hermione suspected she could narrow down the search for the five missing materials through her research, although she had no plans on actually going through with the ritual. It was much too dangerous, after all no one knew what it did or what sacrifice it would require. Besides, she told herself, she was only working on it to satisfy her curiosity. There was no way she was going to attempt any of the rituals, even the ones she didn't consider dark. A ritual that was done incorrectly could have horrible consequences and so it was far too risky.

"This is nothing more than an intellectual exercise." she reassured herself as she reached for a roll of parchment to begin her own notes. "Nothing more."

Harry was in Transfigurations class and had just finished turning a mouse into a kitten when a younger student came into the room carrying a note which he gave to Professor McGonagall. After thanking him and sending him on his way McGonagall read the note.

"Mr Potter." Professor McGonagall said when she was done. "After class your presence is required at the Quidditch fields." Harry nodded and looked back at his work, but his concentration had been broken. He wondered what it could be about although he suspected it had something to do with the Triwizard Tournament. Interrupting his day to break some kind of news to him seemed to be exactly their style. The rest of the class passed slowly but eventually it came to an end. When it did he told his friends good-bye with promised to tell them what was going on and headed out to the Quidditch field.

On the way Harry remembered what he had seen the last time he had been to the fields: they were completely torn up. At the time he didn't think it had anything to do with the Triwizard Tournament but now he was beginning to suspect it did. He had not been back since that day, the sight of the ruined fields was just too depressing for him. Now however a magical barrier had been constructed above the fields that prevented him from seeing what they now looked like.

Once outside Harry saw a group of people standing around talking. The group included all of the other Triwizard Champions, their headmasters (except Karkaroff of course), and Ludo Bagman. Viktor Krum was even there, a surprising fact considering he had returned to Durmstrang after Igor Karkaroff's disappearance. Harry was the last to arrive and apparently the others had been waiting on him.

"Harry! Great to see you again." Bagman said once he saw Harry approaching. Harry did not particularly feel like being nice to the annoying man and said nothing, though Bagman did not seem to notice anything out of the ordinary with Harry's response. "Looks like we're all here then doesn't it?"

"Get on with it, Bagman." Madam Maxine said in her heavy French accent. Harry couldn't help but chuckle at her attitude towards Bagman.

"Very well." Bagman replied with a small frown. "There will be no clues for the third task, instead I will show you." Bagman motioned to one of his assistants who banished the magical barrier with a wave of his wand. As it fell Harry saw that huge bushes had been planted on the Quidditch fields. They were at least twenty feet tall and so thick that it would be impossible to walk through them. It appeared that the bushes had been used to create an enormous wall, although there was a small gap where you could get past it.

"You are looking at the entrance to a great maze." Bagman informed them. "Inside you will face a number of challenges including moving walls, beasts of all kinds, puzzles that must be solved. It will take a combination of intelligence and strength to make it through the maze to the end. Your goal will be the Triwizard Cup and the winner will be the first one to grab it."

None of the champions spoke following Bagman's statement, though they all looked deep in thought. Harry doubted he could get close enough to the Triwizard Cup to cast the tracking spell, and the fact that walls would move made any map he might make irrelevant. It seemed like he was going to have to rely on his own strength rather than elaborate preparations to win the tournament, a fact that might have made him nervous earlier in the year but he was quite satisfied with now.

"When you enter the maze will depend on how you have done in the tournament so far." Bagman continued. "Meaning that you, Mr Potter, will enter first." Bagman smiled at him as Harry nodded. Bagman seemed to have some unexplainable interest in him and how he did in the tournament, but Harry didn't think he had any malicious intent. "Well then, I will see you all on June 24. Good luck to you." Bagman walked away from the champions and began talking to Dumbledore who was slightly more polite than Madam Maxine.

"Harry, where is Hermione?" Krum asked. Harry was quite impressed that Krum had learned to correctly pronounce his friend's name. "I would like to see her before I leave."

"She was going to lunch, so she should be in the Great Hall." Harry told him.

"Thank you." he replied and quickly walked away. Harry smiled at Krum's eagerness to see Hermione, although he wondered if Hermione was as eager to see Krum as he was to see her. He thought she liked the Bulgarian, but perhaps not as much as he liked her. The fact that he lived in another country probably didn't help. His thoughts on Hermione's love life were interrupted when his fellow Hogwarts champion came up to talk to him.

"Hey there Harry." Cedric said. "What do you think about the maze?"

"Sounds interesting." Harry answered as they began their walk back to Hogwarts. "I'm glad that the winner won't be picked by a bunch of judges scoring our performance though."

"That is probably for the best." Cedric agreed. "You know you're lucky you aren't a seventh year. Trying to study for my NEWTs and this is killing me."

"I haven't even taken the OWLs yet, don't try and make me worry about the NEWTs too." Harry said with a laugh. "So what are you going to do to get ready for the last task?"

"I can't think of anything that would really help." Cedric answered honestly. "But I might have a great idea on how to beat the maze and am just saying that to throw you off."

"Sure you do." Harry replied skeptically. "I feel the same way." Cedric laughed as they reached the main entrance to the castle.

"Good luck, Harry" Cedric said as a good-bye and then walked off towards the part of the castle where Harry knew the Hufflepuff dorms were. Harry waved and began walking in the other direction. Suddenly the idea that he only had one more thing to do in the

tournament before it was over struck him and Harry found himself quite happy with that. He was having fun in it so far and it had been good for him but he still hated how he was forced into it. Harry wondered if he would miss the tournament when it was over, but he doubted he would. Even if he won the tournament he knew "Winner of the Triwizard Tournament" would never be what people remembered him for. He still had to wait almost two months for the next task, he realized, so even though there was only one more it be a while before it was finished.

'I better start getting ready for it, I guess.' Harry thought as his mind drifted towards what he had planned for later in the day. If it went as he planned he would have three people instead of two training with him. Now he just had to find Neville...

"Wow Harry! What is this place?" Neville asked as Harry led him into the Room of Requirement later that day. It was currently set up to have one half resemble the Gryffindor common room and the other half to be a large training area. Hermione and Daphne were in the training area casting spells at a moving target when the two boys walked in. They both stopped what they were doing and waved as Harry led Neville over to the common room to explain what was going on.

"Neville, I'd like you to start training with us." Harry said. "We think this is going to be important soon."

"Why?" Neville asked curiously. He had noticed that Harry had been doing much better in school this year, although he just assumed it was because he was studying so hard for the Triwizard Tournament. The idea that it was for something else and that he would be a part of it had never crossed his mind.

"Sit down and I'll explain. It's a bit of a long story." Harry replied as he motioned for Neville to take a seat. For the next hour Harry told Neville everything that he thought the other boy needed to know. Harry began with retelling his adventures of the previous years. Neville knew most of what had happened and could guess at much of what he didn't know, but it was still nice to hear the story from the source. Harry then began to explain the events of this year and their

suspicions that Voldemort would one day return and restart the war that everyone thought had ended so long ago.

"Blimey, Harry. You really think that's going to happen?" Neville asked.

"Yeah, I do. I wish I could say no but Voldemort's never going to stop trying to get his body back." Harry answered.

"I suppose not. I don't think I'll be much help to you though. You three have been doing this for months, plus I'm not that good to begin with." Neville said sadly.

"Quit putting yourself down, Neville." Harry commanded. "We're all going to help you and I'm sure you will be catching up to us in no time. You're my friend Neville, and I want to make sure that if something bad does happen you can defend yourself." Neville looked up at Harry in surprise. Harry not only considered him a friend but had confidence that he could learn and get stronger. He couldn't remember anyone ever thinking he would be a good wizard, not even his grandmother with her constant comparisons to his father.

"OK, Harry. I'll do my best." Neville said sincerely. Harry grinned and jumped up from his seat to head over to the training area as Neville rushed to follow. Daphne and Hermione had already stopped practicing and were talking when the other two approached them.

"Neville's in!" Harry announced excitedly. Hermione smiled while Daphne rolled her eyes at Harry's enthusiasm.

The group spent most of the rest of the night trying to help Neville learn the things they had already mastered. He was eager to learn but his magical abilities seemed very uneven to the others. Even when attempting to cast the same spell multiple times occasionally the spell would not work at all. Upon closer inspection Harry noticed that there was nothing wrong with his incantations or wand movements so it must be something else holding him back, although he had no idea what that was. Hermione and Daphne seemed to notice the same thing Harry did but neither of them could offer an

explanation. Neville soon grew tired from the constant spell casting and decided to go to bed.

"I'll be back next time. I promise." Neville said as he walked out the door to head towards the Gryffindor dorms. Hermione and Daphne were also ready to stop but Harry knew he had to keep pushing himself to reach the point of magical exhaustion. He was about to start casting some of the more draining spells he knew when Hermione stopped him.

"Harry, how would you like to try some more conjuration tonight?" she asked. "You did agree to be my assistant after all."

"Sounds fun." Harry answered with a laugh. "What do you want me to do?"

"You're still wearing that belt that Dumbledore gave you, right?" she asked. When Harry nodded in affirmative she smiled and continue. "Excellent! I researched what it was and what it can do and figured out I can use it to determine how much effort it takes for you to cast a spell. With that I can find which things are harder to conjure than others. Are you following me?"

"I guess so." Harry answered uncertainly. He looked towards Daphne for reassurance but she just shrugged indicating she wasn't sure what Hermione wanted the information for either.

"Great." Hermione said. "We'll start with things you are sure to recognize..."

Harry quickly realized that Hermione had come prepared. She started off having him conjure things she knew would be difficult for him such as silver, bronze, and copper. The next few things she suggested were vastly less difficult for him and included a sheet of tin foil, a lump of coal, salt, sand, iron, and steel. After each item had been conjured Hermione would take measurements to determine how much power had been necessary and write the results on a roll of parchment that was growing longer and longer.

"Very interesting." Hermione said as she wrote down another measurement. "How about mercury next? It's that liquid they put in thermometers in case you weren't sure."

"Alright." Harry answered and looked back at the table he had been conjuring things on. A bowl had magically appeared, thanks to the Room of Requirement, and Harry pointed his wand at it while he prepared to cast the spell. When he spoke the incantation he was surprised to find that this conjuration was much more difficult than the others had been, although not as hard as some others such as copper and silver. "Strange. That was pretty hard to do."

"Was it?" Hermione asked excitedly. The thought of learning something new had taken hold of her and refused to let go. For a moment she looked confused at the results, but then an idea seemed to strike her. "Harry, can you try platinum next? If you need an example I am wearing my grandmother's necklace and it has a platinum charm on it." Harry nodded and studied the necklace for a moment before casting the spell again to similar results.

"That was about as hard as the mercury. I wonder why..." Harry said. Hermione meanwhile was practically jumping up and down in excitement as she started pulling books from her bag. Eventually she brought out a muggle textbook titled "Chemistry" and flipped it open to the very back where a large table was found marked 'Periodic Table of the Elements'.

"This is it, Harry! I was right, Chemistry is the key. It always has been." Hermione said.

"What are you talking about?" Harry asked as he looked over to Daphne who looked equally confused. She knew all about magic, but the muggle sciences were a mystery to her.

"Wizards have always known that some things are harder to conjure than others, but they never knew why. Tell me, did you think it was harder to conjure bronze or copper?" Hermione asked.

"It was about the same I guess." Harry answered.

"Exactly! And that's because bronze is mostly made of copper but with some tin added to it, and you had no trouble conjuring tin. Look at the table Harry, all of the materials that are hard for you to conjure have been in this little group right here." she said as she pointed to the table in the back of her book. Harry looked and sure enough copper, silver, and gold were all in the same column. Platinum, gold, and mercury were also in the same row. Still, he didn't understand why Hermione was so excited.

"OK, so what's the big deal?" Harry asked.

"Harry, this is a major breakthrough!" Hermione insisted.

And it was, but her excitement was not just because of that. It was also because, if her suspicions were correct, she had solved a piece of the Riddle of Heron that her book's author never did. The materials needed for the ritual were actually elements and she had already positively identified five out of the nine. If her guess was correct the other four would be the elements on either side of silver and copper on the periodic table, a fact which explained why no wizard had been able to perform the ritual. After all, how many wizards had even heard of cadmium?

Hermione felt the urge to tell Harry why she was excited. To tell him about the book she had found and everything she had been doing. She got as far as opening her mouth to start before she suddenly stopped. She worried that Harry would be disappointed in her, even though she did not think she had done anything wrong. For a moment she said nothing, but eventually decided that she would tell Harry everything. Just not until after she had solved the rest of the riddle. Then she could give him the book and let him decide what he thought of it.

"So are you going to tell me why it is such a major breakthrough?" Harry asked, pulling Hermione out of her thoughts.

"Oh, of course." Hermione said. "More research is needed, but we could learn why some things are harder to conjure than others. We could learn how the Philosopher's Stone works, we might even be

able to make one on our own. It makes you wonder if Flamel used similar research when he first created the Philosopher's Stone..."

"Ok, slow down Hermione." Harry interrupted with a laugh. Hermione had been rambling, like she often does when she gets excited. "It's probably enough that you understand it."

"Let's say this is as big of a breakthrough as you think it is," Daphne said with a concerned expression on her face "If so you must never publish your work."

"What?!" Hermione said in surprise.

"Think of what would happen if anyone could create their own Philosopher's Stone." Daphne answered. "It would be chaos. The economy would collapse because of all of the new gold, not to mention all the problems that would be caused with no one ever dying. Besides, there are definitely some people that should never get their hands on one." Harry and Hermione both knew exactly who she was talking about.

"I never thought about it like that." Hermione admitted. "Perhaps I'm not the first one to do this type of experiment, but they stopped for the same reasons. I guess I should just forget it."

"You misunderstand me, Hermione. Keep doing your research if you think it will help us, just don't let it get out to anyone else." Daphne said. Harry began laughing at how wonderfully Slytherin the idea was, which didn't mean he did not like it. Hermione seemed to consider the suggestion and then nod in agreement with it.

"You do know that it is doubtful I will ever be able to make a Philosopher's Stone, right?" Hermione asked, worried that expectations were getting too high.

"Perhaps not." Daphne answered. "But we should try for any advantage we can. If you do find something, it will probably be something no one else has."

"We can keep working on it tomorrow, ok?" Harry suggested. "I would like to finish up here pretty soon." Hermione nodded and began to gather her things up. She knew she would probably spend the next few hours going over what she had learned but she did not mind the effort. Daphne had decided to stay and wait for Harry so Hermione left the couple alone. As she left her mind returned to the book that had taken up so much of her time since she had found it. The author had included his thoughts on the nature of magic and it had begun to make her think about what it meant to say that magic was light or dark. While she knew what the Ministry of Magic thought the dark arts were she also knew they had not bothered to explain their reasoning. Her books mostly just repeated what the Ministry said and were therefore useless.

'Perhaps I should talk to Daphne about it.' Hermione thought. If anyone she knew might be able to answer her questions it would be her. Hermione would consider bringing it up, but for now was content to keep thinking about it on her own. She knew some magic could warp a person's mind and personality and had no intention of ever attempting that, but surely there was other magic out there for her to learn that would not do that and was also not exactly ministry approved. It might give her an advantage in a dangerous situation, and she knew that being friends with Harry made her very likely to be in such situations.

'Anything to protect myself and my friends.' she thought as she began to study.

Author's Note:

Definitely some mixed reactions on Hermione's interest in potentially dark rituals. I could be persuaded to take this either way at this point, although I am leaning one way right now. Either path she could take has potential for some good story points. I will say this though, in a lot of ways I agree with those of you who have compared Hermione's relationship with Harry to Bellatrix's with Voldemort. I do not plan on making Hermione the villian of this story, however, so if that is your worry you can rest assured.

Now on to something a little different. Math haters beware!

Ok, let's clear some things up regarding last chapter's revelations on Harry's increasing power. All we know for certain at this point is that Harry started the year already slightly above average as far as his age group is concerned (evidenced by his ability to successfully cast the Patronus Charm as a third year student among other things), since then his magical strength has increased dramatically enough for him and his teachers to notice, and that according to Dumbledore his power increased by approximately one percent following his magical exhaustion. The way I see it this is simply not enough information to accurately determine the true rate at which he is improving.

Let's forget about the "one percent" part and express this a different way. Assume that the first measurement Dumbledore took found Harry's power level to be 1000. Afterwards it had increased to 1010 (a one percent increase). While it is completely true that this could be explained by $FV = PV(1 + 0.01)^n$ it could also be result of $FV = PV + 10 * n$ (where FV is the future value, PV is the present value, and n is the number workouts Harry has gone through).

Now, when I was writing this part I thought it made sense for Harry to have gone through approximately 20 of these practice sessions at this point. So that would mean if Harry was always gaining 1% his starting magical power would have been about 820. If the growth was linear then the initial value would have been 800. Both seem reasonable. But then again we only really have that one measurement to go by so it is possible that the growth is completely random. Who can say at this point? Well I guess I could since I'm the author...

Let me just say that I did recognize that with compound growth Harry could get ridiculously powerful in a fairly short amount of time and that's no fun. I would prefer to hit a balance somewhere between helpless (as he was in the books) and god-like.

As always let me know what you think and thanks for reading.

"I'm not getting anywhere!" Hermione said with a frustrated sigh as she threw her quill down on the desk in front of her.

Over a week had passed since she had identified the nine elements needed for the ritual, with Harry's help of course. She had kept the items Harry had conjured for further study so she now had all that was needed to perform the ritual except a sample of gold. She thought that she could probably just use a galleon if she needed to study the gold but worried that it might have protective charms placed on it that could disrupt her analysis. The only piece of gold in her possession was a thin bracelet given to her by her mother after she had gotten top marks in first year. It was one of Hermione's most treasured possessions.

The problem Hermione now faced was much more complicated than she had assumed it would be. Each element had a rune that corresponded with it and the book she had found informed her that using the wrong rune or element would end in disaster for the person attempting it. With nine runes and nine elements it meant that there were literally hundreds of thousands of different ways they could be arranged. Those two facts meant trial and error was definitely not the right way to figure out the answer to this puzzle. She truly believed she had access to all of the information she needed, but it would still take a lot of work to finish it. 'And what for?' she sometimes wondered. She still had no idea what the ritual was for or at what price the benefits would come, and she was not foolish enough to think that there would be no consequences from the ritual. All rituals involved some element of sacrifice, usually connected whatever benefit the ritual provided. For instance, one of the rituals listed in her book would make a wizard immune to the effects of fire and heat but much more vulnerable to cold. Another ritual enabled its user to breathe underwater, but only after sacrificing the ability to breathe air.

The author of her book had speculated what the ritual was used for, but it was quite clear he had no idea either. The one thing he was sure of, although Hermione was not convinced, was that it would give its user access to a kind of magic no one else had. That statement was vague enough to mean anything though. She pondered those things for a little while longer before closing the book and deciding to end her research for the day. She was spending a lot of time on this

project and worried that her friends would start to wonder what she was doing with her time. Her friends, however, were not at all surprised by her behavior. It was actually quite typical for their bushy haired friends to disappear for hours at a time when she was trying to learn something new. And so, despite Hermione's worries, they had no idea anything strange was going on.

Harry, meanwhile, had his own puzzle to solve.

He had found that Neville was very insecure about his abilities as a wizard and as a result did not learn well in classroom settings where other people were watching and judging him. His atrocious performance in Potions was mainly due to Professor Snape's hostile attitude towards him. Once he was removed from the classroom and learning from a tutor in one on one sessions he began to rapidly improve. Many people in the school had assumed that Neville was an idiot due to his poor grades, but Harry was discovering that was far from true. Neville was actually a quite intelligent young man who desperately wanted to improve himself but had always been too shy and uncertain of himself to ask for help. During the course of the year Harry's friendship had broken through those boundaries and was starting to have a positive effect on him. Underneath it all Neville was honest, hard working, and a loyal friend. It made Harry wonder why the Sorting Hat had chosen to put him into Gryffindor and not Hufflepuff where he might have fit in better. But then again, perhaps Neville's brave side was just waiting for a chance to show itself.

As Neville improved his magical problems became more obvious. He was shockingly inconsistent in casting spells for reasons that Harry was unable to identify. Neville could cast the same spell ten times, with perfect wand movements and incantations, and only get the spell to work six or seven of those times. After one such unexplained failure Harry motioned for Neville to stop casting and then began pacing back and forth in front of his confused friend.

"This doesn't make sense, Neville. You're not doing anything wrong that I can see, so it's got to be something else." Harry explained as he paced. "The only time I've seen anything like it was in second year when Ron was trying to use a broken wand. Wait a minute, your wand isn't broken is it?"

"I don't think so, Harry." Neville answered, but began inspecting it anyway. Neither of them could find any cracks or blemishes on the wand however.

"No, I guess that would have been too simple." Harry said with a disappointed frown.

"Harry, do you think it matters that I'm using my dad's wand?" Neville asked uncertainly. "Gran always said he was a powerful wizard and his wand had to be just as powerful, so that can't be it right? Harry's jaw dropped open in shock. He had never even thought to ask Neville if he was using a wand that had chosen him, he just assumed Neville had. The Weasleys re-used wands because they could not afford to buy new ones for all of their children and he knew the Longbottoms would not have that problem.

"Of course it matters Neville!" Harry replied. "You can't just use any wand you want to, the wand has to pick you."

"What are you talking about?" Neville, who had never been to Ollivander's and thus never heard his speech about wands picking wizards, asked.

"Neville, if I were to use the wand you are using I could probably not do too much better than you are doing. That wand is not a good match for you, even though it was your dad's. Your grandmother really should have known better than to insist you use that wand, it's been holding you back all this time."

"So I need a new wand?"

"Not just any wand." Harry said. "You need a wand that is suited just for you. Ollivander's has thousands of wands, I'm sure you will be able to find one there that will react to you better than the one you have now."

"But Gran said my dad's wand was powerful."

"I'm sure it was. But only when he was using it." Harry explained. "Somewhere out there is a wand that will be as special to you as mine is to me."

"Why is yours so special?" Neville asked. Harry hesitated for a moment, uncertain if he wanted to tell Neville how his wand was connected to Voldemort's. Truthfully the connection worried him, and it didn't help that his dreams were now filled of strange visions of the Dark Lord that made no sense to him. But Neville was an ally, and he deserved to know what was going on.

"When I got my wand Ollivander told me that the phoenix who provided the feather for its core only gave one other feather." Harry said. "And that wand belongs to Voldemort." It was Neville's turn to be shocked, but before he could ask any questions Harry continued speaking. "I don't know what it means. Maybe nothing, but I don't think so. I think I have more in common with Voldemort than I'd like, but I won't turn out like he did."

"I never thought you would, Harry." Neville reassured him. "It's just... a surprise I guess."

"I know what you mean." Harry answered with a little laugh. "Some times I just get this weird feeling, like there is something I can't see pulling me and Voldemort together. I wish it weren't true, but it is. That's why I'm doing all this, Neville. Voldemort isn't done trying to kill me, and I need to be ready for the next time." Neville nodded in agreement, secretly thankful that it wasn't him Voldemort was after. He had no idea how close he had come to being the target of the Dark Lord's wrath.

"Don't worry, Harry. I'll be there to help." Neville assured him. "But it would be nice if I could get a new wand first. How do you do that anyway?"

"Well Ron was able to get one after he broke his..."

"I am not breaking my dad's wand, Harry." Neville said. "No way."

"I don't think you'll have to. Just go to Ollivander's in Diagon Alley the next time you get the chance. I've heard that you're not allowed to have two wands, but since you never got a wand to begin with I don't think it will matter. After all that is your dad's wand and he's still alive." Harry winced as soon as he said it, hoping he had not offended his friend. But Neville just nodded and did not seem to blame Harry for bringing up the sensitive subject of his parents.

"That won't be until summer." Neville said. "And then I'll have to convince my Gran to let me get a new one. She won't like it."

"If you don't think she'll let you, then don't tell her." Harry recommended. "I'll give you the money to buy a new wand if you need it."

"Harry, you don't have to do that..."

"Maybe not, but I've got the money to spare and I'd like my friend to be able to protect himself." Harry answered. "I'll give you the galleons when we get back to the dorms, no arguing. Consider it a birthday present."

"But my birthday isn't until July."

"An early birthday present then." Harry said with a grin which grew into a smile when Neville nodded in agreement.

"So what do we do now?" Neville asked. "I'm not going to get much better until I get a new wand after all."

"How about we start working on Potions?" Harry suggested. "I haven't spent much time studying that this year so we'll be learning most of the material for the first time together, plus you don't need a wand to do it. Besides, don't you want to see the look on Snape's face when you get an O on your exams?"

"That would be pretty funny." Neville agreed with a laugh. "Alright, we'll do Potions." Harry smiled and congratulated himself for coming up with a good solution to their problem. He couldn't wait for the day

when Snape's two least favorite students did better than his beloved Slytherins in his class. Harry was definitely going to enjoy that victory.

Nearly a week later Harry and Daphne were making their way to the owlery so that Harry could mail off a response to Sirius's last letter. Harry's godfather had the good sense to stay hidden even though the decree that said he should be given the Dementor's Kiss upon capture had been lifted. Fudge was still the Minister of Magic and even though it appeared he was on his way out there was no telling what kind of damage he could do on his way down. Although Sirius's letters never said exactly where he was Harry got the impression that he had found a safe house to stay in and was probably getting help from someone, probably Remus. Harry just hoped his godfather was happy and recovering from his stay in Azkaban.

"Fudge's hearing is scheduled for June 25, and if that happens we'll have a new Minister by the first week of July." Daphne said confidently. They, like many other wizards and witches in Great Britain, had been discussing the downfall of Minister Fudge. It was the most exciting political scandal in decades.

"Good. Surely his replacement will be an improvement, no matter who it is." Harry responded.

"We can only hope. Sadly, there are worse politicians out there. Fudge, for the most part, was just an idiot and not actively evil."

"Tell Sirius that." Harry answered, to which Daphne shrugged.

"Well I did say 'for the most part'. He definitely could be evil when he wanted to be." Daphne said. "You know, you could always let it slip who you want to see replace Fudge when Skeeter happens to be listening. Take advantage of the fame that comes with being The-Boy-Who-Lived."

"Would it help? I thought everyone hated me and thought I was going to be the next Dark Lord."

"No, that was last week. They like you this week." Daphne answered with a grin.

"Oh, goody." Harry said sarcastically. "I don't even know who I would support anyway. Any suggestions?"

"I'll think about it." Daphne answered. "I'm leaning towards Rufus Scrimgeour or Amelia Bones though, mostly because they both come from the law enforcement side and would probably increase funding for the Aurors. Bones seems pretty honest, but I'm not so sure about Scrimgeour."

"Bones... is she related to Susan Bones from Hufflepuff?" Harry asked.

"It's her aunt, I think." Daphne answered.

"Oh, well she seems nice enough." Harry responded.

"Harry you can't base your decision on that!" Daphne laughed. "We're going to have to teach you this whole politics thing aren't we?"

"I'd rather not be involved in it."

"You don't have a choice, you already are. You are going to have to face the fact that people care what you think. That gives you influence and influence is power. Use it to your advantage." Daphne advised. Harry shrugged, knowing he had been caught in another 'how to act like a Slytherin lesson from his girlfriend. He didn't mind though, in fact it was probably good for him. By this time they had reached the Owlery and upon Harry's entrance Hedwig flew down to meet her owner.

"Hello, girl." Harry said as he stroked the owl's feathers. "Take this to Sirius, ok? Thank you Hedwig." The owl hooted softly at him before flying off carrying Harry's letter. Neither Harry nor Daphne had noticed that they were not alone in the Owlery until after Hedwig was gone.

"So, helping an escaped convict are you?" Draco Malfoy called from the entrance to the Owlery. Harry turned to look at him and frowned,

Draco must have gotten there right after he and Daphne did and heard at least part of their conversation.

"He's not a convict, Malfoy." Harry answered. "To be a convict you need to actually be given a trial first." Draco shrugged as if this didn't matter.

"Whatever. It's still a crime to be helping him, perhaps I should turn you into the Aurors." he suggested. Harry frowned angrily but was surprised when Daphne started laughing.

"Draco, haven't you been paying attention?" she asked. "No one would care even if you did tell them. Sirius Black is innocent, and Minister Fudge will soon be forced out because of it. Harry would probably get a medal for helping the poor, innocent, man." Draco scowled at her statement, but suspected she was right.

"What's with you this year, Malfoy?" Harry asked. "You haven't been going out of your way to make my life miserable."

"Maybe I have better things to do. Didn't that ever cross your little mind, Potter?" Draco said angrily, although he was beginning to look uncomfortable.

"Perhaps, but I don't think that's it." Harry responded. "Strange how everything changed after I saved your life, isn't it? Dumbledore told me what Pureblood tradition requires in a situation like that. You're a good Pureblood, aren't you Draco?"

By this point Draco's face had turned red, although Harry could not tell if it was because of embarrassment or anger. Harry was surprised when Daphne put her hand on his arm and gave him a small shake of her head.

"Of course he is, Harry." Daphne said. "What did your father say when he found out you had sworn an oath to support Harry?" Draco flinched a little when she asked that and Daphne assumed that Lucius Malfoy's reaction had not been a happy one. She was absolutely correct. Draco had sworn the traditional oath as his education on pureblooded culture had demanded of him but his father

was furious when he found that out. Lucius did not suggest that Draco should not have sworn the oath because his beliefs would have demanded he do the same thing in such a situation, he instead told his son that he should have died instead of accepting help from Harry Potter. Draco suspected that when he went home for the summer he would be receiving some of his father's special brand of punishment in the form of the Cruciatus curse.

"I did what I had to." Draco replied, not really answering the question. "This changes nothing, Potter. I still despise you, and one day I will be free of this silly oath."

"One of us would have to be dead for that to happen." Harry answered. "Believe it or not, I don't hate you Malfoy. If I did I would have let you die. We don't have to be enemies, we only will be if you force that to happen."

"We can't change what we are." Draco answered. "I am a Malfoy, you are a Potter. That is all that needs be said." With that he turned and walked out of the Owlery, leaving Harry and Daphne alone once again. Harry frowned and wondered if Malfoy really did believe that his fate in life had already been determined. Harry certainly didn't.

"What do you think will happen to him?" Harry asked a few moments later.

"I don't know, Harry." Daphne answered. "He's still trying to be his father. There's no hope for him unless that changes." Harry nodded in silent agreement with her. He no longer felt angry towards his former rival, he just felt pity. He wondered what would have happened to the boy if he had grown up away from the influence of Lucius Malfoy, perhaps he could have even been likeable. Harry took Daphne's hand as they walked out of the Owlery, but his brief conversation with Malfoy stayed on his mind for the rest of the day. In the end, he simply found himself hoping that the Slytherin would not follow his father's footsteps and force them to become enemies. He would prefer not to have to kill him.

Finally, after many weeks of studying, Hermione had a breakthrough. She had known that the creator of this ritual was a Greek wizard who

had lived over 2,000 years ago and so many of the clues he left behind might only be recognizable to those familiar with his culture. So she began reading everything she could on the ancient Greek wizards and the society they had built. Her efforts paid off when she found a clue she had not even noticed before that identified which element corresponded to one of the runes. After that four of the others were easy to determine, although the last four were still a bit of a mystery to her. Despite that she felt closer to solving the Riddle of Heron than she ever had before and now thought it could be finished in a few weeks if she was lucky.

Happy with her progress, Hermione decided to take a break for the rest of the night. She was in the Room of Requirement and knew Harry and Neville would be coming in soon to practice Potions anyway. As she carefully closed the book she noticed that the page just inside the front cover had become unstuck. Destroying a book was unforgivable as far as she was concerned and immediately began trying to repair it. It was then that she noticed what she had assumed was one page was in fact two pages stuck together. Very carefully, she began to pull the two pages apart. She was quite excited because she hoped the first page would have the name of the author and when the book was written. She moved slowly so that none of the pages would be torn and after several minutes she was able to pull the pages apart far enough to notice a design on one of them. As she continued pulling more of the page was uncovered and she realized that the design looked very familiar.

The drawing on the first page was very similar to the crest used for Slytherin house, although this one did not contain any mention of Hogwarts. For a moment she thought that perhaps it was just an older version of the Slytherin symbol, but then remembered a fact from 'Hogwarts' A History' that it had not been changed since the school's opening. No, she realized, this wasn't a school crest. It was a family crest, meaning that the book she had been obsessed with was written by someone from Salazar Slytherin's family. Considering the age of the book, it could have even been written by Salazar Slytherin himself.

Hermione closed the book, unsure of what to do now. Did it even matter that the book was written by a Slytherin? She wasn't sure,

although it certainly would explain the author's extensive knowledge on dark rituals. Hermione closed the book and went back to her chair to sit down and think about this new fact. As soon as she sat down though she heard the noise of the door being opened and two voices that she recognized as Harry and Neville talking. She briefly thought that perhaps she should hide the book, but realized there was no time to do that,

"Hey Hermione. What are you doing here?" Harry asked when he noticed her. "Did you want to help us out with our Potions?"

"Uhh, sure Harry." Hermione answered. "Actually, there was something I needed to talk to you about."

"What is it? Is everything ok?" Harry asked.

"You see I found this book." Hermione said and turned to point at the book on rituals she had been using. To her surprise though the book had disappeared along with the stand it had been laying on. She realized the room must have hidden it when she thought about hiding it as Harry and Neville came in. Hermione looked back at her friends who were now waiting for her to finish.

"It's probably nothing." Hermione finally said. "Just forget I said anything."

"Are you sure you're ok?" Harry asked, the concern for his friend evident in his voice.

"Sure, Harry. I've just had a lot on my mind lately" Hermione answered. It was just a book after all, wasn't it? And the book wasn't talking to her or trying to get her to do anything, so it wasn't evil in of itself. Besides the ritual, even if she did try it, wasn't the work of Slytherin. He was just trying to figure it out, and he clearly didn't even know as much about it as she did. No, there was no reason to worry and if she told Harry that is surely all he would do, It wouldn't even matter if she couldn't figure out the last four runes.

"OK. So how about helping us with Potions?" Harry asked, unaware of his friends train of thought.

"Sounds fun, Harry." Hermione replied as they began working.

And so the weeks passed and the end of the school year drew nearer, and with it the third task of the Triwizard Tournament.

At Hogwarts the students soon became too worried about their OWLs, NEWTs, and regular end of year exams to spend much time gossiping about either the tournament or its participants. That did not mean the majority of them suddenly decided to forget all of the negative rumors that had been started regarding Harry, just that they were mainly ignored in favor of other topics. For most of them it had been a typical year, despite the excitement of the Triwizard Tournament.

The rest of the British wizarding world was still obsessed with the political drama surrounding Minister of Magic Cornelius Fudge. As the days went by it became clearer and clearer that he would not survive the hearing unless he had some huge surprise waiting, which he did not. Rita Skeeter had not let up in her attacks on Fudge, and Harry and Daphne were happy to let her continue to do so as long as she was still useful to them. There had still been no sign of either Peter Pettigrew or Barty Crouch Junior, despite all of Dumbledore and the Ministry's efforts. Whatever they were up to, they were being quiet about it. That fact worried Harry and Dumbledore more than if they had been making visible and obvious moves.

Harry, Daphne, Hermione, and Neville all continued training themselves whenever they had time to. For Harry, this meant he was able to complete about three of his special training sessions every week. By the end of the year it was obvious to all of them that Harry had vastly improved over where he was at when the school year began. The most surprising development however belonged to Neville. Once away from Professor Snape's influence he had developed a true love and talent for potions. His interest in the subject had drastically increased after Hermione pointed out that most Potions ingredients were plants, and Neville was truly a prodigy when it came to Herbology. Realizing how closely linked the two subjects were, Neville immediately dedicated himself to learning the properties of his beloved plants and how they could be used in

various potions. Snape still harassed him during class, but he had fewer and fewer legitimate reasons to do so.

By the end of the year the four of them had developed close friendships with each other. Even Hermione and Daphne, who had both initially been wary of the other girl, had grown to respect and like each other. Harry thought that despite all that had gone wrong in the year he had still enjoyed it much more than any of the previous ones, a fact he would not have expected to be true at the beginning of the year.

'Now,' Harry thought, 'I only have to get through one more task and the year will be over.' He had no idea how difficult that would be.

It was a week before the end of the year and Hermione was once again in the Room of Requirement trying to solve the Riddle of Heron. A month before she had identified another connection between a rune and an element leaving only three more to find. She had narrowed it down far enough that if she found one more she would easily be able to determine the other two.

The work had been complicated and exhausting, causing her to study subjects she had not even considered before. She had enjoyed the experience however and was glad she had gone through with it, even if she had no idea what to do with the information. She had struggled with the decision but decided that the risks were not worth going through with the ritual. In fact she was a little ashamed of herself for even considering it. Hermione knew she could find other ways to improve, besides it was not important to rush things.

"YES!" Hermione suddenly yelled, surprising even herself with how loud it came out. She had figured out another piece of the puzzle, but it was the key piece. At last she had identified in what configuration all nine elements and runes should be used. Hermione's face broke out into a huge smile at what she considered the greatest accomplishment of her life so far. Of course she could not prove it was right since she wasn't willing to go through with the ritual, but she was certain it was correct.

"Perhaps I should tell Harry." Hermione considered, There was no reason not to, was there? Of course Harry did have a lot on his mind with the final task only days away... She would wait, Hermione decided. After the year was over and everything had calmed down she would tell him everything. She only hoped he wouldn't be too mad at her for not telling him earlier.

Author's Note:

Next chapter we start the third task. I hope this didn't feel too rushed moving on from the second task but there was little I wanted to do with that time period and decided not to just fill it with pointless rambling. I do promise you things will be different, I just hope you like what I have planned.

As always let me know what you think and thanks for reading.

At last the day of the third and final task of the Triwizard Tournament had arrived. Harry tried his best not to let the excitement that had built up affect him, but as the date drew nearer the anticipation had grown to a fever pitch in the castle and it was impossible to ignore. He told himself that he should be proud to have done so well in the tournament as it was, but he knew that if he did not win the tournament he would be very disappointed. Harry had never worked so hard for anything in his entire life and at last he would have the chance to prove himself in front of everyone.

With about an hour left before the task was to start Harry, Daphne, Hermione, and Neville went to the spot where the Quidditch pitch once stood but was not a massive maze that Harry would have to navigate. The hedges that served as the maze's walls had grown since Harry last saw it and he knew that there would be no easy way to go through or over them. The stands were already at least half full and they were spending their time talking, laughing, and singing to a band that was playing festive music. All things considered, Harry thought it was a great setting for the third task.

"Wow. How many people do you think are going to be here?" Neville asked as he looked around.

"I don't know. Thousands." Harry answered as he led them to the front where they could sit down. None of the other champions had arrived yet, but Ludo Bagman was there talking to one of his assistants. Harry noticed that when Bagman saw him his face took on a very confused expression, but it quickly went away and was forgotten as Harry returned to the conversation his friends were having.

"I should have looked harder Harry, I know I could have found a way through the maze..." Hermione was saying as she looked at the massive obstacle in front of her. Harry laughed in response to her concern though.

"Stop worrying about it, Hermione. I am as ready as I can be." he assured her.

"Still, you should be careful." Daphne reminded him. "There is really no telling what they have in there. People have died in this tournament, do not underestimate it." Harry nodded in agreement, he had gone through this on his own just hours earlier. Winning the tournament was not something worth dying for, but he would fight for it none the less. He had long since vowed to win the tournament, an action that had resulted in a number of positive changes in his life, so there was no way he would let this chance slip by him.

"So what does Krum think, Hermione?" Harry asked.

"That he would rather be playing Quidditch." Hermione answered. "Karkaroff was really the one pushing him to enter the tournament and now that he's gone Viktor just seems bored with it. He'll do his best, but his real goal is to not get hurt and endanger his Quidditch career."

"That's probably the smart thing to do." Harry commented. "Cedric and Fleur won't be holding back though, at least judging from what I have seen so far. They're all good competitors, but I would guess that Cedric is going to be the toughest opponent."

"And he'll be the second one in the maze, right after you." Neville added. Due to their performances in the first two tasks Harry would enter the maze first, followed a few minutes later by Cedric, then Krum, and finally Fleur. It gave Harry a slight advantage, but by no means guaranteed his victory. The group continued chatting until a few minutes later when Hermione saw Viktor Krum arrive. She then wished Harry good luck and gave him a hug before walking off to talk to the Bulgarian champion.

"She's going to break up with him. Not right now, of course, but soon." Daphne commented as she watched Hermione and Krum talk on the other side of the stands.

"What?" Harry said in surprise. "I thought Hermione liked Krum."

"She does, just not enough. Did you know he asked her to come back to Bulgaria with him?" Daphne asked. "He even offered to help her transfer to Durmstrang."

"No, she didn't tell me." Harry answered.

"Even Krum could see that things are getting dangerous in England these days. He thought she'd be safer there with him, and he's probably right. But Hermione told him that she couldn't leave, no matter how dangerous things got. Apparently they argued about it but she wouldn't change her mind."

"When did this happen?" Harry asked, wondering why Hermione had told Daphne and not him. His friend had seemed a little distant over the past few weeks.

"Over the past few days for the most part. She wanted to tell you about it but thought you didn't need to worry about her love life with the third task coming up." Daphne said. Harry frowned, wishing that Hermione had talked to him anyway. At the very least he could have told her that he supported her decision. It wasn't surprising that Krum wanted nothing to do with the problems in England though, it was after all not his home. Still, Krum seemed like a good guy and it would have been nice to have him as an ally.

"I'll talk to her after this is all over with. I suppose I haven't spent much time with her lately either. I've just been busy." Harry said with a shrug. It was true. He felt like his days had been overwhelmed with schoolwork, practice for the tournament, studying potions with Neville, and spending any free time with Daphne that his friendship with Hermione had been neglected. He vowed to fix that once the tournament was finally over and behind him.

"Hey Harry, ready to lose?" a friendly voice asked from behind him, causing Harry to turn around and look for its source. He saw a smiling Cedric Diggory walking towards him holding hands with Cho Chang.

"Cho, it's great to see you again." Harry answered, smiling. "Although I do wonder why you still waste your time with this berk."

"Oh, he's good for the occasional laugh." Cho answered, trying not to giggle while making fun of her boyfriend. "Probably the same reason Daphne keeps you around."

"Exactly." Daphne answered before Harry could say anything.

"Harry, do you see what you've done?" Cedric replied. "You've turned them both against us. Next thing you know they'll be picking on Neville too."

"Leave me out of this." Neville wisely commented, resulting in laughs from everyone else.

"You ready for this, Harry?" Cedric asked seriously.

"I think so." Harry answered with a nod. "What about you?"

"As ready as I'll ever be. I just wanted to say that you've really impressed me, Harry." Cedric said. "When your name came out of the Goblet of Fire I thought you would be lucky to survive the tournament, but here we are nearly at the end and you're beating all of us. Whatever happens, you should be proud of yourself."

"Thanks, Cedric. That means a lot to me." Harry replied sincerely. "I really shouldn't be in this tournament to begin with, and you would be winning right now if I wasn't."

"That's not your fault, Harry." Cedric answered. He knew better than to think that Harry had put his name in the Goblet of Fire and had never really believed it. "Still, I hope your ready to get your ass kicked by me today."

"I look forward to seeing you try." Harry said with a laugh. A moment later a loud voice was heard calling for the champions to assemble at the entrance of the maze for final instructions. Harry looked around and noticed that in the time they had been talking the stands had completely filled up with eager spectators. "Sounds like it's time to go..."

Before he could leave or say anything else Daphne wrapped him up in a tight hug and softly said "Be careful, good luck." to him. Harry nodded and hugged her back before letting go of the embrace and turning towards the maze. He glanced sideways to see Cho had

Cedric in a similar hug, except she appeared to be crying as Cedric assured her he would be alright. Nodding, she finally let go and the two Hogwarts champions approached the third and final task of the Triwizard tournament side by side. Ludo Bagman was at the entrance to the maze motioning them over, and when all four champions were there he began to go over what was expected.

"Very good, you're all here. Congratulations on making it this far." Bagman said. "But this will be the most dangerous task yet. If, at any time, you can no longer continue in the maze all you must do is fire sparks into the air and someone will come get you. The first person to grab the Triwizard Cup will be declared the winner. Now, are there any questions?" Bagman looked from person to person, giving them the chance to say something but none of the champions seemed to have anything they needed to ask. When his eyes landed on Harry Bagman's mouth opened as if he had something to say, but quickly closed his mouth and once again got a confused expression on his face which he tried to shake off so that he could continue.

"Well then... you'll be up first Harry. The cannon firing will be your signal to proceed. Good luck to all of you." Bagman said as he walked off. Harry took his place at the entrance to the maze and tried to calm himself before he began. In the background Bagman was speaking to the audience and informing them all of the rules for the third task, although Harry wasn't really paying attention. Suddenly the crowd began to quiet down as they all waited for the cannon to fire. Harry pulled out his wand and wrapped his fingers tightly around it as the excitement in the crowd began to rise. Moments that felt like hours passed as Harry eagerly waited to begin.

BOOM!

Finally, the cannon fired and Harry happily ran into the maze. Seconds later he ran into a wall and was forced to make his first decision of the day: whether to turn left or right. Neither option appeared any more attractive than the other, so Harry picked one at random and turned left, heading deeper into the maze. He had walked about twenty paces in that direction when he met his first obstacle of the day, although this one made him laugh instead of shiver in fear. A group of about a dozen cornish pixies was flying

straight towards him and they appeared to be quite angry. This was something that even an average wizard should have no problem with, although he did remember it being too much for Gilderoy Lockhart to handle in second year.

"Stupefy!" Harry called out, altering the wand movement slightly so that the stunner was a bit weaker but covered a larger area. As the bright red light hit the pixies they immediately dropped to the ground unconscious. Harry looked at the tiny blue creatures with and laughed, wondering what else he would find in the maze. His thoughts were interrupted by a loud roar that came from somewhere deeper into the maze. The roar was easily as loud as a dragon's, although it sounded different and must have come from something else. It seemed that the more dangerous obstacles would be found farther in to the maze.

The sound of the cannon firing forced Harry to start moving again. He knew that it was the signal for Cedric to enter the maze and he wasn't that far ahead of the other Hogwarts champion. He looked back to see if it was possible to see Cedric from this point in the maze, but at that moment the huge bushes making up the wall of the maze grew together and blocked his view and his way back. The new wall looked just like all the others, meaning it would be impossible for him to tell if the maze had changed unless he remembered what it looked like previously. His thought that attempting to map out the maze would be useless proved to be absolutely correct.

Harry turned and continued in the direction he had been heading. Soon he was faced with another decision on which way to go and this time chose to turn right instead of heading straight. He knew that the Triwizard Cup was roughly in the center of the maze so decided that he would try to head in that direction, although he knew that there was no way he would find a direct route. The path he was on lead him through many twists and turns, but the path did not branch out and offer him a choice to head in a different direction. After a while he began to get a bad feeling that this part of the maze led to nowhere, a belief that was confirmed a few minutes later when he ran into a dead end. He groaned in frustration as he had no other choice but to turn around and retrace his steps. He doubted it would be the last time that happened to him today.

Once again Harry heard the cannon firing, this time meaning that Viktor Krum had now entered the maze. Harry wished he had some way of knowing how the other were doing but that was impossible. The only sign that he would have they were in trouble would be if they shot sparks into the air, and that had not happened yet.

Harry continued on and began to explore new paths that would hopefully lead him to the Triwizard Cup. Eventually he came to a circular clearing that had five paths leading off in different directions. As he stood there deciding which way to go he heard the soft sounds of some creature coming towards him. He turned to face the new challenge with his wand ready to defend himself when he saw dozens of creatures that looked like grey lobsters with green spots approaching him. The small animals were closer than he thought they would be and Harry knew he was very fortunate to have spotted them when he did. Harry recognized them to be mackled malaclaws and while it was doubtful they could kill anyone a bite from a malaclaw would make a person unlucky for about a week. Any champion that was bit by a malaclaw would therefore almost certainly not win the tournament and was likely to get hurt by one of the maze's other obstacles.

"Petrificus Totalus!" Harry called out, casting the body bind curse on all of the creatures at once. Even with the curse in place the lobster-like creatures were still attempting to bit him, although they couldn't get any closer. Harry then levitated them all into the center of the circular room where he thought one of the other champions might come and disillusioned them. Harry laughed as he walked out of the circular room and into an unexplored path. He would know better than to walk through the center of the room, but maybe his competition wouldn't. He did not want any of them to get hurt, but he would take any advantage he could get.

The cannon then fired for the fourth and final time. Now all of the champions were in the maze. Harry felt that he probably had a decent advantage on the others but the maze was so confusing that it was hard to tell how much of one he had. He felt a renewed sense of urgency rising in him and knew he would have to move fast if he wanted to win.

As Harry rounded the next turn in the maze he came face to face with a giant wall of fire. He suddenly had the urge to turn around and head in a different direction and in fact was almost back around the corner when he realized that his urge to leave had been produced by a strong compulsion charm. Knowing that it was a trick, Harry turned back towards the wall of fire. He pointed his wand at the fire and cast the flame freezing charm, but his spell flew past the wall of fire and seemed to have no effect at all. Harry tried again and got identical results. With a curious look on his face, Harry began to approach the wall of fire and immediately realized something was off about it. Despite the huge flames that reached as high as the massive walls of the maze the fire was not giving off any heat at all.

"It's an illusion!" Harry suddenly realized. Smiling, Harry confidently walked through the flames and safely out the other side. He hoped this was a sign he was headed in the right direction, but knew it was possible the maze's designer just wanted him to think that. The maze was proving to be quite challenging.

Harry kept exploring the maze, but the next two paths he took resulted in dead ends that wasted valuable time. The other champions could be well ahead of him by now if they didn't face similar problems. His worries that the other champions could be beating him were lessened when he heard a feminine scream towards the direction of the entrance of the maze followed shortly there after by red sparks shooting high into the sky. Harry assumed that meant Fleur Delacour, wherever she had been, was now out of the tournament. He wondered what had gotten to her, but since she took a different path than him it was impossible to know.

As Harry continued walking the maze wall suddenly closed behind him, forcing him to continue in the direction he was heading. Only moments later though he felt the ground begin to slightly shake and heard loud footsteps approaching him. Something big was headed his way, and from the sounds of things was just around the next corner. Harry held his wand out, ready to cast any spell he needed to and waited for the threat to approach. Slowly a massive shape turned the corner in front of him and Harry found himself facing a huge troll.

The troll slowly turned its head as if it knew someone was close by but wasn't sure where. Harry noticed that it was dragging a large wooden club behind it, although due to its size the club looked more like a tree trunk than anything else. It then began snarling and sniffing the air like an animal still looking for its prey. Harry knew that he could get past this obstacle, after all he and Ron had fought off a troll as first years. This one was quite a bit bigger, but it still had weaknesses. While trolls were incredibly resistant to spells cast on them, spells that affected the environment around them were especially useful.

The troll finally spotted Harry and began charging towards him, his massive club held up high in the air waiting to strike. Harry knew he had to act quickly and first cast "Aguamenti", causing a large pool of water to appear between him and the troll. His next spell was "Glacius", which froze the water he had just conjured. When the troll hit the ice it began to slip and Harry helped it fall by casting a strong "Impedimenta". As the tripping hex hit the troll it fell hard on its face and broke its nose. Harry wasted no time in conjuring vines out of the earth that wrapped around the troll and held him down. He kept conjuring vines until he was sure that the troll could not move at all, although it still was shaking in a useless attempt to free itself. He then calmly walked past it and further into the maze, leaving the troll screaming in frustration.

Harry kept searching for the Triwizard Cup, but after another fifteen minutes he was still unable to figure out where to go. He knew that he was now somewhere close to the center of the maze and that the Cup should be close by, but he had still not seen it. At one point he had heard the sound of Krum battling some type of beast, but the thick walls prevented him from seeing what was going on. He did not see any sparks shoot up from where the fight was going on however, and assumed Krum had won.

He then resumed his search and walked down a path that had just become available to him when the walls shifted again. He knew he was now in a part of the maze he had not seen before and hoped it would produce better results than the last one. Harry had been walking for a few minutes when he heard a scream coming from very close by. He started running towards the scream and when he turned the next corner saw what had caused it.

Cedric Diggory was in a violent battle with an acromantula, and the giant spider was winning. Cedric had been knocked to the ground and the acromantula had him pinned down, its huge fangs ready to strike and release their venom into its victim. Cedric could hardly move and his wand appeared to have been knocked out of his hand and out of reach.

Harry reacted immediately and jumped into battle to save the older champion who had become his friend. A strong cutting curse aimed at one of the spider's legs severed it in half and drew a pained hissing noise from the beast. Its attention turned towards Harry and as it approached him Cedric was able to free himself and crawl away towards his wand.

"Conjunctivitus!" Harry said as he pointed his wand towards the acromantula's many eyes. When the curse hit the spider's eyes it howled in pain and frustration because it could no longer see. Cedric took advantage of the creature's attention towards Harry and hit one of its back legs with a strong Reducto that shattered the appendage and left it useless. Harry's next spell was one that would almost certainly be considered dark if it had been used on a human being, but he had no problems using it on a spider. "Cruormorsus!" he called, causing a dull orange spell to fly towards and hit the spider. As it did the acromantula's blood became slightly acidic, causing the beast to violently shake in pain. Harry held the spell for a few seconds longer and soon the animal was curled up in a ball making strange cries of pain.

"I think you beat it, Harry." Cedric said as he walked over to the other champion. Harry had stopped the spell, but the animal was still clearly in excruciating pain.

"I wasn't sure what that spell would do. Now I feel a little bad about using it, even on an acromantula." Harry said softly. He then walked towards the spider and cast another cutting curse, this time on its neck. The spider died immediately. "It would have died anyway, I just hope I saved it a little pain." he explained.

"I understand. It was the nice thing to do." Cedric agreed. He then turned his back towards Harry to look around the maze, still trying to figure out which way he wanted to go. "This tournament is pretty crazy, huh?"

"I'd say so." Harry answered. For a moment neither of them said anything else, but then Harry decided it was time to leave. "Hey Cedric..."

"Yeah Harry?"

"I'm sorry about this."

"Huh?" Cedric said as he turned his head back towards Harry. He immediately saw that Harry had his wand pointed at him, but Cedric had no time to draw his wand and defend himself. Harry silently cast Stupefy and his fellow Hogwarts champion dropped to the ground as soon as the spell hit him. Harry almost felt bad about this, but figured he had done enough to help Cedric by saving him from the acromantula. Besides, what he did wasn't against the rules. He shot sparks into the air so that someone would come and help his friend before leaving the area behind him.

It was only minutes later that Harry turned another corner that looked like countless others he had seen in the past few hours, but this time something was different. The corner led to a long straight hallway and at the end the path the Triwizard Cup was softly glowing as it stood on a pedestal. Harry grinned in excitement, he was finally at the end! He began running towards the Cup and realized a moment later that it was good he was running because the maze's walls began to crash down around him. Harry ran as fast as he could and was only barely able to keep ahead of the falling bushes that threatened to crush him. When he reached the clearing at the end of the path he took a moment to catch his breath before walking up to the Triwizard Cup.

The trophy itself was beautiful and Harry thought with a smile that it would look good hanging up in his dorm room. As he reached towards it he stopped with his fingers only inches away from the Cup. He could feel magic flowing off of it, but he was unable to identify what spells had been cast on it from the feel alone. He paused,

wondering if this was some trick and not really the Triwizard Cup. Unfortunately he had no way to know for sure. It certainly looked like the Triwizard Cup. Harry cast the diagnostic charms he knew on the cup and was able to determine that it had not been poisoned and there were not any deadly curses placed on it, but beyond that he was clueless.

After a few moments he decided that he had no choice but to take the Triwizard Cup and see what happened. Taking one final breath to prepare himself, Harry grabbed the cup and immediately felt a familiar pulling sensation at his navel.

"A portkey!" he said in realization as he vanished. Harry had never liked traveling by portkey, but remembered the tips he had heard on how to land safely unlike his last journey by portkey. Even so when he landed he dropped down to a knee and immediately had his wand out ready to face anything. He was still surprised by what he saw...

"HARRY POTTER WINS THE TRIWIZARD TOURNAMENT!" Ludo Bagman's voice called out as the crowd erupted into cheers so loud that Harry was tempted to put his hands over his ears to protect himself from them. He looked around and saw that the portkey had dropped him on a huge stage that had been erected in front of the maze's entrance. Fleur Delacour was seated in a chair towards the back of the stage looking quite unhappy. Harry then noticed that Cedric Diggory and Viktor Krum were both being led out of the maze and towards the stage. Krum also looked disappointed, but Cedric was surprisingly laughing as he looked at Harry. Harry smiled back, happy that Cedric apparently didn't hold any hard feeling towards him for what happened in the maze.

"Congratulations, Harry." Cedric said after leaping onto the stage. "But that was still a dirty trick you used."

"I know, but I said I was sorry." Harry reminded him as they both started laughing about it. Krum calmly climbed the steps to the stage and nodded slightly in Harry's direction. Harry shrugged and decided that was as much of a congratulations as he was going to get from the Durmstrang champion. The crowd, meanwhile, had not quieted down in the least. The cheers only became louder when Harry

proudly raised the Triwizard Cup over his head for all to see. As he did he scanned the crowd looking for his friends. Eventually he found them and saw that they were all excitedly waving at him and cheering.

"Come, Harry. There is still much to be done." Ludo Bagman said from behind him. Harry nodded and walked towards the podium that Bagman had positioned himself behind. Another tournament official was motioning for him to place the Triwizard cup on a small stand in front of him and Harry happily did so. They had to wait several minutes for the cheering to die down so that Bagman could begin the presentation, but eventually he did.

"Ladies and gentlemen, today is a monumental day for our world." Bagman began. Harry looked at the older man curiously. His normal speaking voice was excited and spontaneous, but he was now talking in an odd monotone and as if he were reading from a script. "Truly, a day for the history books. You, Harry Potter, are more important than you realize."

The crowd continued to cheer. They, apparently, did not share Harry's concern that something felt a bit off about the whole situation.

"You will bear witness. You shall see the rise of the greatest wizard of our age." Bagman continued. He then pulled a galleon out of his pocket and turned towards Harry. "Tonight, the Dark Lord lives again!" Bagman then thrust the galleon towards Harry and as it touched him Harry once again felt the odd pull at his navel which he knew meant the coin was a portkey, this time definitely not one taking him to a safe location. In the brief moment before he disappeared, Harry looked into Bagman's eyes. They were dull, emotionless, and looked slightly clouded over.

'The imperius curse!' Harry was able to think before he vanished.

In those few short moments the cheers of the crowd turned to screams and panic. This only escalated when Ludo Bagman pointed his wand in the air and yelled "Morsmordre!", causing the dark mark to appear in the sky. The first one to act was actually Cedric Diggory, who promptly knocked Bagman unconscious with a stunner to the

back. Aurors and Professor Dumbledore rushed to the stage, but by that time there was little they could do.

Harry Potter was gone, and they had no idea where he could possibly be.

Author's Note:

So, what did you think of the third task? I think I dropped enough hints earlier that there was something going on with Bagman, and this was a new way to get him to Voldemort's resurrection party. Yes, Cedric lives. I think the character has potential and would like to keep him around for a while.

Anyhow, hope you guys liked it. Thanks for reading and please review.

Harry's second portkey journey of the day was much longer and more disorienting than the first. He felt his body spun around as if he were in some kind of magical tornado which seemed to never stop. Finally he felt the spinning slow and knew he was approaching his destination. Harry concentrated on holding on to his wand and hoped he would be able to land on his feet, but as the portkey dropped him he rolled on the hard ground before finally coming to a stop. As he lay there Harry tried to reactivate the portkey, but it was no use. Bagman had given him a one way portkey, meaning he would have to find another way home. Pushing himself to a standing position, Harry desperately tried to fight off the dizziness as he looked around trying to figure out where the portkey had taken him

He was in a cemetery, Harry realized at once. He had walked past cemeteries before and knew what they were supposed to look like, but this one seemed completely wrong to him. The headstones marking the graves were mostly old and crumbling, and instead of being arranged in neat rows they had apparently been placed randomly. The grounds were not covered with freshly cut green grass but hard rocks and dirt with only a few sickly weeds sticking up through the ground. None of the graves had flowers placed near them, leading Harry to think that perhaps no one had come here in quite a long time.

The sound of footsteps approaching quickly proved that he was wrong. Harry quickly turned towards the direction the footsteps were coming from and saw two figures approaching him, each wearing dark cloaks that covered their faces. One was small, fat, and appeared to be carrying something like a parent would hold a baby. The other was taller, thinner, and his head had the habit of jerking from side to side as if looking for threats. Suddenly Harry felt a painful burning in his scar and he knew without a doubt what, or rather who, was being carried towards him.

"Seize him." a strange, almost inhuman, voice called out from the bundle that the fat man was carrying. The taller man stepped forward with his wand held ready before pulling back the hood of his cloak to reveal his face.

"Barty Crouch Junior." Harry said in recognition as he raised his wand to face the older man. That would mean that the shorter man was almost definitely Peter Pettigrew.

"Correct, Mr Potter. Ten points to Gryffindor." he answered with an insane chuckle. "There'll be no one to come and rescue you now. I suggest you just give up, it will be far less painful that way."

"Go to hell, Barty." Harry said as he silently cast a bone breaking curse at the man who had once impersonated Alastor Moody. Crouch was able to sidestep the spell fairly easily and sent a body bind curse at Harry, apparently attempting to capture him as he was ordered. Harry brought up a shield which was easily able to absorb the energy of Crouch's curse and then began trying to lure Crouch away from the others. Wormtail seemed to be focused on protecting whatever form Voldemort had taken that was now laying in his arms, but Harry knew he would have to keep an eye on them.

Crouch's next spell was, surprisingly, a Stupefy. Harry almost laughed at this because he realized that he held an advantage over his opponent. Crouch, for whatever reason, was trying to subdue him without injuring him. Harry did not have to worry about trying to avoid hurting Crouch, in fact he wanted to do so.

Harry sent a series of chained spells at Crouch including a Incendio, a Confundus, a Jelly-Legs jinx, and ended with a spell that produced hurricane force winds. The first two spells missed and Crouch was just barely able to raise a shield against the Jelly-Legs jinx but he was caught completely off guard by Harry's wind spell. Crouch's magical shield was unable to stop the physical force of the wind and he was hurled back several feet and landed painfully on his back. Unlike their first battle, Harry was now casting completely silently and with much more power than he was previously capable of.

Crouch began rolling as soon as he hit the ground and was, luckily for him, able to avoid Harry's follow up curses. He was quickly growing frustrated by his situation and the fact that this mere boy was beating him. With a pained grunt Crouch leapt to his feet and screamed "Crucio!", hoping that he would not only catch his opponent off guard but that his master would not be too angry with him.

Harry, however, was prepared for the Death Eater's use of an Unforgivable curse and conjured a stone shield to appear in front of him. Crouch's Cruciatus curse struck the wall and shattered it, but in doing so the spell's energy was spent and it died harmlessly. Before the stone pieces could hit the ground Harry banished them back at Crouch and was happy to hear the man yelp in surprise and pain.

"Damn you, Potter!" Crouch roared as he angrily raised his wand again. Harry saw with a brief smile of satisfaction that he had his enemy frustrated and off guard, but unfortunately this had caused Crouch to abandon his earlier plan to capture Harry unharmed. "Reducto!" Crouch shouted, causing Harry to jump to the side in order to avoid the powerful spell. Harry's wand never left Crouch as he avoided the spell, and as soon as he had the chance Harry returned fire. This time he did say the name of the spell out loud because he wanted Crouch to hear what was coming, after all he was the one who had taught it to him.

"Inficio!" Harry called as a sickly yellow light erupted from the tip of his wand. Crouch's eyes widened in surprise as he tried to avoid the spell but he wasn't quick enough and it caught him on the hip. Immediately his cloak began to disintegrate and the skin below bubbled as if it were melting. He was barely able to contain his screams enough to perform the counter curse which still left behind a nasty looking wound.

"Use my spell against me, will you?!" Crouch yelled in rage. "Avada Kedavra!" The Killing Curse flew towards Harry and he reacted on instinct by conjuring another stone wall to shield himself. This time the impact of the spell turned his shield into dust instead of pebbles like the Cruciatus curse had done.

"Barty, you fool!" Voldemort screamed from his spot on the sidelines. "I need him alive!"

"Forgive me, master." Crouch answered, although his eyes never left Harry. "I shall not fail you again." Harry had briefly glanced over and even from far away could see that Voldemort had been able to take some, small physical shape. Which meant that he could be destroyed

by his touch like Quirrel had been in his first year at Hogwarts. He only needed to get past Crouch and close enough to Voldemort to grab him...

"Stupefy!" Crouch called, bringing Harry's attention back to the duel. Harry in response raised his most powerful shield and began running towards his opponent. Crouch began rapidly firing non-lethal spells at Harry but his shield was far too strong to be broken by any of the simple spells he was using. Before he knew it Harry had almost completely closed the distance between them and Crouch hesitated, not sure if Harry was trying to physically or magically attack him. A mere moment before Harry reached Crouch he dropped his shield and began casting the strongest blasting curse he could manage. By the time he completed the spell the tip of his wand was inches away from Crouch's chest and the man had no chance at all to do anything to lessen the impact of the curse. The powerful spell sent Crouch flying through the air and across the cemetery. He was only stopped when he hit a large headstone which broke in half from the impact. He was immediately knocked unconscious.

Harry watched this happen and felt a small amount of shock. He didn't think he had put that much power into the spell, but apparently it was enough. Harry briefly wondered if Crouch had survived the crash. He hadn't noticed, however, that his charge towards Crouch had brought him alarmingly close to Wormtail and Voldemort. He never even saw the stunner that hit him in the back coming.

"Good, Wormtail. Now we can begin." Voldemort said with a chilling laugh.

Meanwhile, the panic at Hogwarts had not died down any. The Dark Mark still hung menacingly in the air, constantly reminding everyone what had happened. Most of the spectators had remained in their seats even though the tournament had ended. Many stayed to discuss whether or not the Dark Lord could or would return, others stayed because they expected something else to happen.

Harry's friends attempted to get as much information from their teachers as was possible, but in truth no one seemed to really know what was going on. All they could determine for sure was that Ludo

Bagman had been taken into custody and was now being interrogated in Professor Dumbledore's office by the Aurors and the Headmaster himself.

Bagman's questioning started with an examination of his left arm, where to some surprise they did not find the Dark Mark. Further inspection revealed signs that Bagman had been under the Imperius curse very recently and was therefore probably not responsible for his actions. After being awoken and dosed with Veritaserum he revealed that he could not remember anything he had said on stage after Harry's victory, nor did he know who had placed the Imperius curse on him or where the portkey had taken Harry.

These revelations meant that there was no easy way to find Harry. Unless they got very lucky it would be up to Harry to find his way home.

The first thing Harry noticed when he woke up was that he could not move his arms or legs. His eyes slowly opened and saw that he was tied up and he had no idea where his wand was. He knew he had made a mistake and lost track of Wormtail during his fight with Crouch. He would've kicked himself if he could have moved his legs. Harry tried to think of how he was going to get out of this situation, but so far nothing came to mind.

Looking around, Harry saw that Barty Crouch Junior's unconscious body was still slumped against the broken headstone where he had fallen. Crouch appeared to still be breathing, indicating he must have survived the impact. Harry felt a small bit of relief when he saw that, even though he knew it was probably a foolish thing to do in this situation. Voldemort had apparently decided it wasn't worth the effort to heal Crouch yet. With Harry tied up the Dark Lord must not have felt that his adversary was much of a threat. Wormtail, meanwhile was busy watching over a huge cauldron that was full of some dark, bubbling, liquid. Harry wasn't sure what the potion was for, but he knew it was not a good sign.

"It's ready, my lord." Wormtail said humbly.

"Begin at once." the ugly creature that was Voldemort replied. Wormtail nodded and carefully picked up his master before placing him in the cauldron. The potion inside hissed as sparks shot from it and the liquid inside began to swirl around violently, but after a few moments it calmed down and Wormtail continued with the ritual.

"Bone of the father... unknowingly given... you will renew your son." Wormtail said. As he spoke he lifted what Harry assumed was a human leg bone and dropped it into the cauldron. The potion bubbled again and turned an ugly blue color. Wormtail paused to check on the potion as if he was unsure he had done it correctly but when he had assured himself he had he continued. It was clear from his words what he intended to do. Harry knew without a doubt he was watching a ritual meant to return Voldemort from his body.

Harry struggled to free himself and stop the dark ritual, but it was no use. He still could not move. He began trying to think of a way to disrupt the ritual but was unsure what he could do. His only hope was to get Wormtail to end it himself.

"Flesh of the servant... willingly given... you will revive your master." Wormtail said as he lifted up a knife and placed it at his wrist. He was a moment away from slicing it off when Harry interrupted him.

"Peter, stop!" Harry yelled. "Please don't do this."

"It's too late for that, Harry." Wormtail answered and raised the knife again.

"You don't have to do this!" Harry replied, still hoping that the man would change his mind.

"But I do. I have no choice, you see. If I don't do this he will kill me."

"I saved your life! You owe me." Harry said, but he knew his words were having little impact.

"It doesn't work that way." Wormtail then turned away placed the knife on his wrist once again. He closed his eyes as if trying to work up the courage to go through with the act and then, with all his

strength, pushed the blade through the flesh and bone of his arm. When he was done his entire hand dropped into the cauldron and he howled in pain. The potion, meanwhile, continued to simmer but had now turned a red color much like blood. Wormtail took a minute to compose himself before continuing the ritual.

"Blood of the enemy... forcibly taken... you will resurrect your foe." the Death Eater said as he approached Harry. He still held in his hand the ritual knife he had been using and Harry knew Wormtail had come for his blood.

"Don't do it, Peter. Please." Harry said, but Wormtail was now ignoring him. He drew the knife and plunged it into Harry's arm as Harry fought to not scream out in pain. The tip of Wormtail's knife was now coated with Harry's blood, and he held it carefully as if it contained some priceless treasure. Wormtail walked over to the cauldron and lightly flicked the knife at it, spilling a few drops of Harry's blood into the concoction. It immediately began to spark and bubble like never before, eventually turning a blinding white color. Wormtail began stepping away from the potion as if he were afraid of it, but his eyes never left it. Harry's attention never left the cauldron either and for a brief moment he held hope that something had gone wrong. But then he felt pain from his scar like never before, and knew that somehow Wormtail and Barty Crouch Junior had returned Lord Voldemort to his body.

A moment later a dark form began to rise out of the cauldron. It was bald, pale, and covered in a dark cloak. Although its form was human, Harry thought it looked more like some dark creature. The creature held its head in its hands as it rose out of the still bubbling potion. When he was finally free Voldemort pulled his hands away from his face and to look at them, giving Harry his first clear look at what the Dark Lord had become.

Voldemort looked nothing like the teenage version of Tom Riddle Harry had encountered in the chamber of secrets. He had been a rather handsome young man with dark hair and pale skin. The monster now standing before Harry had skin that was almost grey and no hair at all. Its face only looked vaguely human, with a flat

nose and bright red eyes. The Dark Lord spent a moment examining himself carefully as if looking for flaws in his form before turning to face Harry and sending him a cruel smile.

"Come, Wormtail." he commanded.

"Yes, master." his servant answered as he scampered towards Voldemort. He then knelt and held out a wand towards his master. "Your wand, my lord" Voldemort reached out and grabbed the wand. As his finger touched it his twisted face took on an expression of triumph.

"Your arm." Voldemort demanded.

"Thank you master!" Wormtail exclaimed as he happily held out his stump of an arm.

"Your other arm." Voldemort clarified. Wormtail gasped in surprise, but obediently held out his other wand. Even from far away Harry could see that Wormtail's Dark Mark was now as black as night and perfectly visible. Voldemort pressed his wand into his servant's arm as the other man winced in pain but said nothing. Moments later men in full Death Eater's robes began apparating into the cemetery. Each of them wore masks that covered their faces so Harry was unable to see who had come. One thing was clear however: his odds of escaping had dropped dramatically.

The Death Eaters stood in a circle surrounding Voldemort as he looked around inspecting them. Harry could not tell if he was happy with what he found or not, but the Death Eaters seemed to be nervous. As the Dark Lord began speaking they all dropped to a knee, as if before royalty.

"After all these years, my friends, we have been reunited." Voldemort began. "And yet I must wonder, where were all of you when I needed you the most? For years I was trapped somewhere between life and death, and none of you searched for me."

"I did, my lord." Wormtail bravely, or perhaps foolishly said.

"Out of fear, not loyalty. I suppose you do deserve some reward for your efforts however. Hold out your arm." Voldemort ordered and Wormtail gratefully complied. Using a spell that Harry did not recognize, Voldemort conjured a magical silver hand to appear where Wormtail's had been. Wormtail held up the hand and stared at it in awe. Voldemort meanwhile was looking at his wand with a confused expression on his face, as if something had happened he did not expect. A moment later the look was gone and he was once again standing before his followers.

"Where were you Avery? Or you, Goyle? Crabbe? Nott? And what of you, Malfoy?" Voldemort asked. Harry sat and listened, though he was not at all surprised to see it confirmed that Lucius Malfoy was a Death Eater.

"My lord..." Malfoy began to plead pathetically, "I was constantly on the alert. Had there been any sign, any whisper-"

"Quiet, Lucius." Voldemort said forcefully, and Malfoy knew better than to continue. "There will be time to make up for past failures later. Now we must be suitable hosts and attend to our guest." With that he pointed at Harry who was still tied up and bleeding from his arm. Harry could hear the Death Eaters laughing from behind their masks at his predicament. Voldemort began walking towards him as he spoke, and was soon standing right in front of him. "The world was foolish enough to think that this mere child had destroyed the most powerful wizard of all time. It was not he that defeated me that night, but a mistake on my part. Old magic was at work that night, powerful magic. I did recognize it then, but I do now. And I have overcome it. Believe me Harry, I can touch you now." With that Voldemort pressed his finger into Harry's forehead where his famous scar lay. The pain Harry felt in that moment eclipsed anything else he had ever experienced.

"Now Harry, we shall see if the Boy-Who-Lived can truly stand against Lord Voldemort." the Dark Lord said with a sneer. "Wormtail, untie him. And give him his wand." Wormtail rushed to obey his master, and soon Harry was free with his wand in his hand. Harry nervously looked around and knew full well that he was surrounded by potential threats as well as face to face with one of the world's

most powerful wizards. Voldemort looked like he was preparing to continue his speech, but Harry thought his best option was to get on the offensive and stay on it as long as he could.

Harry began casting and moving as quickly and as powerfully as he could. Even Professor Flitwick would have been proud of him if he had been there. The chain of spells he used was one he had come up with months earlier and practiced constantly. It included piercing hexes, tripping jinxes, cutting curses, Crouch's acid spell, bone breaking curses, a tickling charm, a cutting curse, a charm that caused boils to break out on its victims face, and ended with a massive Bombarda. But even though Harry was casting at his best nothing seemed to get past Voldemort's defenses. Everything he threw at the Dark Lord was either blocked by conjured or summoned items or simply avoided. When the dust cleared from his last spell, which had been powerful enough to leave a small crater in the ground, Lord Voldemort was still standing there laughing at him.

"I'm impressed, Harry." Voldemort said. "Perhaps you should rethink the offer I made to you years ago. Join me and I will help you reach your full potential."

"Never!" Harry responded angrily. He then transfigured two headstones into massive bears which he sent to attack Voldemort, but before they could reach him the Dark Lord had destroyed them with two lazy swipes of his wand.

"You still have much to learn. A pity you won't get the chance." Voldemort taunted.

Harry wasn't sure what to do. Despite all of his training and his relatively easy victory over Barty Crouch Junior he was still clearly not in Voldemort's league. Gathering his courage, Harry went back on attack. He decided that he would have to use his deadliest spells and so cast "Cruentum", the same spell he had used against the acromantula in the maze. Voldemort was finally forced to raise a shield to defend himself, but when he did something very strange happened. Beams of pure magic stretched from each of their wands, connecting them. As they did Harry felt a strong drain on his magical reserves and knew he could not keep this, whatever it was, up for

very long. Voldemort was distracted by this unexpected phenomenon, and Harry saw his chance to strike.

Harry ended the spell just as it started to form a dome above him and quickly fired off a cutting curse towards Voldemort's head. The Dark Lord had been distracted by what had happened and tried to side step the spell but was only partially successful. A long cut opened up on Voldemort's cheek and blood began to trickle down to his chin. Voldemort roared in anger and then finally began attacking Harry. Harry used his speed to avoid the first wave of spells, but as he tried to jump behind a headstone was struck with the Cruciatus curse.

Harry screamed as Voldemort held the torture curse on him. He had felt the curse before during his fight with Barty Crouch Junior, but the Death Eater's version of the spell felt like a tickling charm when compared to Voldemort's Cruciatus. The pain coursed through every part of his body and Harry felt as if he were on the verge of going insane. A moment later Voldemort lifted the spell and Harry could hear the evil man laughing at his suffering.

"So this is all the great Harry Potter can manage? Pathetic." Voldemort laughed. "I think I shall send your head back to Dumbledore. What do you think of that, Harry?"

"No good." Harry gasped. "He likes socks." The Dark Lord chuckled at Harry's response and slightly lowered his wand. Harry's trembling fingers closed tightly around his wand which he had almost dropped during his torture at the hands of Lord Voldemort. The Dark Lord took a step back and motioned for Harry to stand up.

"Get up, Harry. You do want to meet death on your feet, don't you?" Voldemort said. Harry had been slowly making his way to a standing position anyway and a moment later was finally able to stand and face the Dark Lord. Harry looked around for some last minute way to save himself, but could find nothing. He was still completely surrounded and no help was coming.

'I'm going to die here.' Harry thought with sad laugh. His little chuckle soon turned into an audible laugh which had the Death Eaters

thinking that perhaps Lord Voldemort's Cruciatus had driven the Boy-Who-Lived insane after all.

"You think death is funny, do you?" Voldemort asked as he raised his wand towards Harry. Finally Harry stopped laughing and raised his wand to face the Dark Lord. "Any last words?"

"Screw you, Tom." Harry said with another laugh. Voldemort, furious with Harry's use of his true name, yelled out "Avada Kedavra" and sent the killing curse flying towards Harry who was able to leap out of the way. Around them the Death Eaters, fearing that a stray killing curse could catch them unprepared, began to search for cover. Harry returned fire with a "Reducto", but Voldemort was easily able to avoid it. The Dark Lord then cast another killing curse, but Harry was able to conjure a rock wall to shield him from the spell. The shield exploded when the curse hit it, but Harry didn't wait for the dust to clear before banishing a conjured spear back towards Voldemort. When the dust settled it was clear he had missed, but he had no time to think about it because Voldemort sent yet another killing curse his way.

Harry leapt to the side to avoid the curse, but unfortunately Voldemort had been expecting that and had summoned a headstone which slammed into Harry's side and knocked him off balance. Before Harry could recover Voldemort had cast the killing curse again. Harry's eyes widened as he saw the green spell speeding towards him. In that moment he knew he couldn't avoid it, and that he had been beaten.

The impact of the spell knocked Harry off of his feet and sent him spinning to the ground. When he landed Voldemort stood victorious over Harry and looked down at his unmoving body. Below him, Harry's lifeless eyes lay open and staring off into the distance.

Back at Hogwarts, Minister of Magic Cornelius Fudge had arrived and taken the stage in an attempt to calm the audience and look for a way in which he could take advantage of the situation for his own political benefit. With his hearing on the Sirius Black case only a day away Fudge was getting desperate to find a way to remain in office. He knew the last thing the public wanted to hear was that You-Know-

Who was still alive and so he spent his time on stage promising that the Dark Lord was dead and that there was no way he could ever come back. Some people seemed eager to believe him, but others weren't convinced.

Ludo Bagman had been transferred to the Ministry of Magic for further questioning. It seemed clear that he would not face charges for his actions due to the evidence pointing towards the Imperius curse. He was however immediately fired from his position with the Ministry and rumors were beginning to circulate that the goblins had demanded he be turned over to them after his release to face punishment for crimes against them.

Harry's friends did not give up searching for more information, but unfortunately they continued to find nothing new.

Meanwhile Dumbledore sat alone in his office wondering what he could have done differently, and what it would mean if Harry died. One thing was clear: dark days lay ahead.

Harry eyes popped open and he sat up, wondering what had happened. Upon seeing his surroundings however, he also wondered where he was. A strange whimper caught his attention and he turned to look in that direction. He saw a a strange creature that reminded him of what Voldemort had been before the ritual to return him to his body, but Harry had no idea what it meant. Around him the world was completely white and without definition, and the blankness of his surroundings seemed to go on forever.

"Harry." a gentle female voiced called out, seemingly from all around him.

"Hello?" Harry asked. "Who's there?" As he continued to look around he finally saw two forms approaching him in the distance. As they drew closer he saw that one was man and the other was a woman. They appeared to be holding hands and slowly walking towards him. After what felt like hours to Harry, they finally got close enough that he could see them clearly.

"Mom? Dad?" Harry said uncertainly. "Is that really you?" Finally they were close enough for him to be sure, and when he was he ran to them and allowed them to wrap him into a strong hug. Harry could not help but begin crying as he held on to his parents for the first time he could remember. For a long time they hugged and did not speak, and for that time Harry's questions about what was happening seemed unimportant to him.

"It's ok, Harry." his mother reassured him. "It's really us. Well, as real as it can be."

"I'm dead, aren't I?" Harry asked. "Does that mean I get to stay here with you?"

"You aren't exactly dead, son." his father informed him. "But you aren't exactly alive either. You have a choice, Harry. You can die, or you can go back."

"What if I want to stay with you?" Harry replied. The emotions from meeting his parents were still overwhelming.

"We have some things to explain to you first." Lily answered. "We love you very much Harry, but it is important that you go back."

"Why?" Harry asked, clearly upset.

"Because of Voldemort." James said, and glanced over to the ugly creature that Harry had noticed when he first arrived. "Voldemort has tried to make himself immortal, and that is how."

"What is it?" Harry asked, looking over at the creature his dad had pointed at.

"It's a piece of his soul." Lily answered. "He accidentally transferred it to you the night we died. It is why your scar hurts whenever he is around. It's called a Horcrux, Harry, and as long it is still alive Voldemort can not truly be killed."

"But if I die it does too, right?" Harry guessed. "So I can't go back."

"That piece will die even if you do go back." James said. "But that isn't the only piece of his soul that needs to be destroyed. He's made others, and it up to you to find them."

"Why me? Why not Dumbledore, he's stronger than I am." Harry replied.

"There was a prophecy made before you were born. Dumbledore never told us exactly what it said, but it meant that either you or Neville Longbottom would have defeat Voldemort. Things have changed since then, and it's clear that it has to be you." Lily said sadly.

"But how? He's better than me-"

"No!" James yelled. "He may be stronger, but he is not better than you."

"He is stronger. And if I do get back to my body I am still going to be surrounded by Voldemort and his Death Eaters with no way to escape. Then, if by some miracle I do escape, I have no idea where to look for his Horcruxes." Harry said in frustration. He simply did not see a way to make it work.

"We will help you, Harry." Lily said softly. "Or to be more precise, we will force Voldemort to help you."

"How?" Harry asked.

"That piece of his soul he put inside you contained all of his personality and intellect right up until the moment he separated it from the rest of his soul. We can take parts out and give them to you." James said with a proud smile, as if it had been his idea.

"So you can just give me all of his knowledge?" Harry said, realizing how this could help him.

"Not exactly." Lily replied. "You see it's impossible to separate his personality from the things he knows, so the more information we

take out of him and put in you the more of his personality will also get transferred. If you took everything you would basically become him."

"So what do I get?" Harry asked.

"Everything he knows about his Horcruxes. That way you should be able to make him mortal again and then kill him." Lily explained. "And then his knowledge on how to apparate. Use that to escape the cemetery and make it back to Hogwarts. Those are the only things we dare pull from him."

"This is going to change my personality isn't it? How much?"

"We're not taking much, so it shouldn't even be noticeable." James answered. "We're trying to be as careful as we can."

"Ok then. I'll do it." Harry said finally. "Do I have to go now?"

"Yes, I'm sorry but you do." Lily said with tears in her eyes. She pulled Harry and her husband into another hug which they happily returned. "You'll see us again one day, Harry. But hopefully not for many more years. Never forget that we love you very much."

"I love you too Mom, and you Dad." Harry replied. Soon they were all crying and holding each other. They stayed this way for a few moments, but then Harry felt everything start to change. He felt like he was being pulled away from them by some undeniable force. His parents let go of him and began waving good-bye, but his vision was starting to cloud and he could no longer see them clearly. Then everything suddenly went black.

The first thing Harry felt when he returned to his body was the dull ache that came as a result from the Cruciatus curse. He knew in that moment that he was alive again. He laid there for a minute listening to Voldemort give a speech about his plans for world domination and hoping no one had seen his eyes close. Harry expected someone to point out at any moment that he was still alive, but all attention was apparently still on Voldemort.

Harry finally got the courage to slightly open his eyes and glance around. The Death Eater were all facing away from him and towards the Dark Lord in such a way that only Voldemort could possibly notice that his eyes were open. He noticed with a small amount of surprise that no one had bothered to take his wand out of his hand, apparently they were convinced he was dead.

His parents had told him to apparate out, and when Harry concentrated on the subject he realized he knew almost everything about it. He even knew that he could apparate to a standing position from laying on the ground where he was. Voldemort had studied apparition extensively. Harry wondered what chaos he could cause before leaving when he noticed that Wormtail was standing at the back of the group being ignored by everyone. He had already dropped to the lowest spot on the Death Eater hierarchy. Grinning, a plan quickly came together in his head.

Harry watched and waited for his chance. Finally Voldemort ended his speech to the cheers of his loyal followers. In that moment Harry apparated to a standing position right behind Wormtail. No one had even noticed him moving around.

"Hey Tom!" Harry yelled as he grabbed Wormtail's arm. "Did anyone ever tell you that you suck at that spell?" The Death Eaters turned and stared at him in shock. Voldemort was equally surprised but had the presence of mind to raise his wand at Harry. He was too late though. Before anyone could stop him Harry had apparated both himself and Wormtail out of the cemetery and back to Hogwarts.

Minister Fudge was still on stage talking to the audience, however when he asked if they had any questions he had been forced into defending himself regarding the accusations he would face at his hearing the next day. It was an uncomfortable position for him and he was desperate to escape it.

"I will answer all of these questions tomorrow." Fudge promised. "But let me assure you of a few things. Sirius Black is guilty and Peter Pettigrew is dead."

As soon as he spoke those words Harry appeared on the stage with Wormtail who was still in shock from seeing Harry alive. Harry stunned the traitor as soon as they arrived and then began looking around. Most of the crowd was still in the stands and had burst into applause as soon as he appeared. The Dark Mark in the sky had faded but was still visible.

"He's back." Harry said to the Minister of Magic, but Fudge chose to turn his head in disbelief. Angered by this, Harry ripped the sleeve of off Wormtail's robes, exposing the dark mark below. "Voldemort is back!" he yelled, but this time it was loud enough for those in the audience to hear. Soon everyone knew what Harry had claimed and were struggling with whether or not to believe it.

Harry was able to watch the Aurors take Wormtail into custody before the exhaustion caught up with him and collapsed right in the middle of the stage.

Author's Note:

There are quite a few important points in this one that I hope you catch. I've been thinking about this scene since I started this story and I hope you like the way it turned out. Either way, please let me know. Thanks!

CHP22